

# Vietnam's Foreign Policy

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## INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents an analysis of Socialist Republic of Vietnam's foreign policy from 1991, when Vietnam's decade-long international isolation was lifted following a comprehensive political settlement of the Cambodia conflict, to 2016.

The framework and strategy for Vietnam's overall foreign relations is set at five yearly national congresses of the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP). This policy is implemented through resolutions of the VCP Central Committee and VCP Politburo. Vietnam's foreign minister is normally a member of and answerable to the Politburo. The five yearly cycle of national party congresses shapes the structure of this chapter.

This chapter is divided into four sections. Section one examines Vietnam's adoption and implementation of the foreign policy of 'multilateralizing and diversifying' its external relations up to 2005. The year 1995 was pivotal, Vietnam normalized its relations with the United States and became a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Section two explores Vietnam's pursuit of strategic and comprehensive partnerships with Russia, Japan, India, China, European states and Australia, as well as Vietnam's engagement with multilateral institutions in the period from 2006 to 2010. Section three assesses Vietnam's consolidation of relations with the major powers, new strategic partnerships, and the South China Sea issue in the period from 2011 to 2016. Section four, concludes that Vietnam's policy of 'multilateralizing and diversifying' its external relations was largely successful but the maritime dispute with China over the

South China Sea poses major challenges to Vietnam's attempt to maintain its autonomy and independent foreign policy.

## VIETNAM'S FOREIGN POLICY, 1991–2005

From the founding of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945 until the end of the Cold War four and a half decades later Vietnam pursued a foreign policy of alignment with the Soviet Union as a loyal member of the socialist camp (Thakur and Thayer, 1992: 53–62; Palmujoki, 1997). Two major developments prompted Vietnam to radically alter its foreign policy framework – a decade-long period of international isolation and domestic economic stagnation following its invasion of Cambodia and the disintegration of socialism in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Two major turning points mark Vietnam's remarkable reorientation of its foreign relations. In December 1986, Vietnam adopted a bold new policy of renovation or *doi moi* at the Vietnam Communist Party's (VCP) Sixth National Congress aimed at overcoming the domestic socio-economic crisis (Thayer, 1987). The Political Report to the congress by VCP Secretary General Truong Chinh called for the expansion and heightening of the effectiveness of external economic relations as one of the means of addressing the domestic economic crisis (*Eighty-five Years of The Communist Party of Viet Nam*, 2015: 659–64). The second turning point came in May 1988 when the VCP Political Bureau adopted Resolution No. 13 entitled, 'On the Tasks and Foreign Policy in the New Situation'. This resolution codified Vietnam's foreign policy objectives by giving priority to economic development and calling for a 'multi-directional foreign policy' orientation with the goal of making 'more friends, fewer enemies' (Porter, 1990; Chu Van Chuc, 2004; Luu Doan Huynh, 2004; Nguyen Dy Nien, 2005: 31–7).

**Seventh National Party Congress.** In mid 1991 the VCP's Seventh National Party Congress endorsed a 'multi-directional foreign policy' for Vietnam (Vu Khoan, 1995: 75). The Seventh Congress adopted the *Platform for National Construction in the Period of Transition to Socialism*. The *Platform* declared that Vietnam would by-pass the capitalist stage of development and embark on a prolonged transition to socialism 'involving many stages' of which the present was just the 'initial stage' (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1991: 49–50).

The Seventh Congress also adopted an important modification to Politburo Resolution No. 13. Vietnam would now 'diversify and multilateralize economic relations with all countries and economic organizations'. In short, 'Vietnam wants to become the friend of all countries in the world community, and struggle for peace, independence and development.' According to the Political Report, 'We stand for equal and mutually beneficial co-operation with all countries regardless of different socio-political systems and on the basis of the principle of peaceful co-existence' (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1991: 134).

The Political Report, however, gave priority to relations with the Soviet Union, Laos, Cambodia, China, Cuba, other 'communist and workers' parties', the 'forces struggling for peace, national independence, democracy and social progress', India, and the Non-Aligned Movement. It was only at the end of this list that 'new friends' were mentioned:

To develop relations of friendship with other countries in South-East Asia and the Asia-Pacific region, and to strive for a South-East Asia of peace, friendship and co-operation. To expand equal and mutually beneficial co-operation with northern and Western European countries, Japan and other developed countries. To promote the process of normalization of relations with the United States. (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1991: 135)

Vietnam reaped substantial foreign policy dividends following the Cambodian peace agreements in October 1991 as trade and aid sanctions imposed by the international community were lifted. Vietnam succeeded in diversifying its foreign relations by moving from dependency on the Soviet Union to a more diverse and balanced set of external relations. For example, in 1989, Vietnam had diplomatic relations with only twenty-three non-communist states; by 1995 this number had expanded to 163. During this period, Vietnam normalized its relations with all members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), acceded to the 1976 ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, and normalized relations with China in November 1991 (Thayer, 1992: 55–62; 1996: 78 to 88). In July 1995 Vietnam became ASEAN's seventh member and in 1998 Vietnam joined the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum.

Not all was smooth sailing. In February 1992, China's National People's Congress passed the Law on Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone that claimed all islands in the South China Sea, including the Paracel and Spratly archipelagoes. China's law now put it on a collision course with Vietnam regarding sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. This took the form of a series of maritime incidents in the 1990s precipitated by China's grant of an oil license to a US oil company to explore in waters falling within Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone or EEZ (Hayton, 2014: 123–30).

**Mid-Term Party Conference.** In January 1994, the VCP convened its first Mid-Term Party Conference. Secretary General Do Muoi delivered the Political Report that reaffirmed Vietnam's commitment to the broad outlines of economic and political renovation that emerged since the seventh congress. The major policy theme to emerge from the Mid-Term Conference was that priority would be given to industrialization and modernization and that mobilizing domestic and foreign capital was crucial to meet this objective. The Political Report therefore listed the expansion of Vietnam's external relations as one of its essential tasks (Political Report of the Seventh Communist Party of Vietnam Central Committee delivered by General Secretary Do Muoi at the Opening of the Midterm National Party Conference, 1994: 60) *Nhan Dan*, 21 January 1994.

After the mid-term conference the official Vietnamese media highlighted what it termed the 'four dangers' facing Vietnam: the danger of being left behind economically by regional countries; the danger of peaceful evolution against socialism; the danger of corruption; and the danger of the breakdown of social order and security (Party conference delegates' discussions 22nd January; 'four challenging dangers', 1994: B/5) (Voice of Vietnam, 22 January 1994).

In the period from the mid-term conference and the convening of the Eighth National Congress in mid 1996, Vietnam continued to pursue an open door foreign policy designed 'to make friends with all countries' (Vo Van Kiet, 1995). These efforts paid handsome dividends. In 1993–94, the United States ended its long-standing objections to the provision of developmental assistance to Vietnam by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and gradually lifted restrictions on trade and investment with Vietnam. Vietnam thus became eligible for a variety of aid, credits and commercial loans to finance its development plans.

In July 1995, Vietnam made a major breakthrough on the foreign policy front; it normalized relations with the United States, became ASEAN's seventh member, and signed a framework cooperation agreement with the European Union that restored development assistance suspended after Vietnam invaded Cambodia. For the first time, Vietnam had diplomatic relations with all five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and, equally important, with the world's three major economic centres – Europe, North America and East Asia.

***Eighth National Party Congress.*** The next turning point in Vietnam's foreign policy came at the Eighth National Party Congress held in late June/early July 1996. For the first time delegates from non-communist ruling parties in Cambodia, Malaysia and Singapore were included.

The foreign policy section of the Political Report, entitled 'characteristics of the world situation', noted that 'the revolution in science and technology continues to develop at an increasingly higher level, rapidly increasing productive forces while accelerating the process of shifting the world economic structures and the internationalization of the economy and social life' (*Eighty-five Years of The Communist Party of Viet Nam*, 2015: 887). According to Vu Khoan, 'this was the first time we had spoken of globalisation and assessed that it was an objective trend' (Vu Khoan, 2006).

The Political Report also juxtaposed the potential for conflict arising from competition in the areas of economics, science and technology with the potential for cooperation arising from peaceful co-existence between 'socialist countries, communist and workers parties and revolutionary and progressive forces' and 'nations under different political regimes'.

The Political Report stated:

To do our utmost to increase our relations with neighbouring countries and ASEAN member countries and other ASEAN members, constantly consolidate relations with traditional friendly countries, attach importance to relations with developed countries and economic-political centres of the world, at the same time upholding all the time the spirit of fraternal

solidarity with developing countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and with Non-Aligned Movement. (*Eighty-five Years of The Communist Party of Viet Nam*, 2015: 917)

***Traditional Friends – Russia.*** In March 2001, Vietnam consolidated its ties with the Russian Federation, a ‘traditional friendly state’, by signing its first strategic partnership agreement during the course of a visit by President Vladimir Putin to Hanoi (Thayer, 2012a: 206–8). This agreement set out broad-ranging cooperation in eight major areas: political-diplomatic, military equipment and technology, oil and gas cooperation, energy cooperation for hydro and nuclear power, trade and investment, science and technology, education and training, and culture and tourism. Russian arms sales to Vietnam soon became the largest and most significant component of the strategic partnership (Thayer, 2011a, 2012b, and 2013b).

***Ninth National Congress.*** Between the Eighth National Congress in 1996 and the Ninth National Congress in 2001, Vietnam and the United States painstakingly negotiated the terms of the United States-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement (Manyin, 2003: 5–6). It was clear that Vietnam’s policy elite was divided on the terms of the Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) and the risks of overexposing Vietnam’s economy to the forces of globalization.

Consensus to move forward was reached at the tenth plenum of the VCP’s Central Committee held in June–July 2000. The plenum concluded that in order to achieve the objective of industrializing and modernizing Vietnam by 2020, Vietnam had no choice but to step up the rate of economic growth, attract more foreign investment, and continue regional and global integration. The tenth plenum gave its approval for the new trade minister, Vu Khoan, to go to Washington to sign the BTA. Key clauses in this agreement were phased in over a period from three to nine years. At the same time the United States granted Vietnam temporary normal trade relations status on a year-by-year basis. The BTA was a necessary step that Vietnam had to undertake in order to secure US support to join the World Trade Organization (WTO).

At the Ninth National Congress, held in April 2001, the VCP reaffirmed that ‘Vietnam is prepared to be a friend and reliable partner of all countries’ by diversifying and multilateralizing its international relations. Priority was placed on developing relations with ‘socialist, neighboring and traditional friendly states’ (*Eighty-five Years of The Communist Party of Viet Nam*, 2015: 1032).

The Ninth Congress set the goals of overcoming underdevelopment by the year 2010 and accelerating industrialization and modernization in order to become a modern industrialized state by 2020 (*Eighty-five Years of The Communist Party of Viet Nam*, 2015: 1014 and Thayer, 2002). According to Vu Khoan (2006), the Ninth Congress resolution identified two main measures to attain this goal:

First, perfect the regime of a market economy with socialist characteristics, and second, integrate deeper and more fully into the various global economic regimes. Integration into the global economy will tie our economy into the regional and global economies on the basis of common rules of the game.

A Politburo resolution adopted in November 2001 outlined Vietnam's diplomatic strategy as follows:

continue to strengthen relations with Vietnam's neighbours and countries that have been traditional friends; give importance to relations with big countries, developing countries, and the political and economic centers of the world; raise the level of solidarity with developing countries and the non-aligned movement; increase activities in international organizations; and develop relations with Communist and Workers' parties, with progressive forces, while at the same time expanding relations with ruling parties and other parties. Pay attention to people's diplomacy. (Vu Duong Ninh, 2002:110)

In sum, since the Ninth Congress Vietnam has pursued the objective of integrating Vietnam's economy with the global economy.

***Partners of Cooperation and Struggle.*** In mid 2003, the VCP Central Committee's eighth plenum provided an important interpretation of two ideological concepts – 'partners of cooperation' (*doi tac*) and 'objects of struggle' (*doi tuong*) in foreign relations. According to the eighth plenum's resolution, 'any force that plans and acts against the objectives we hold in the course of national construction and defense is the object of struggle'. And, 'anyone who respects our independence and sovereignty, establishes and expands friendly, equal, and mutually beneficial relations with Vietnam is our partner' (quoted in Thayer, 2008: 27).

The eighth plenum resolution argued for a more nuanced dialectical application of these concepts:

with the objects of struggle, we can find areas for cooperation; with the partners, there exist interests that are contradictory and different from those of ours. We should be aware of these, thus overcoming the two tendencies, namely lacking vigilance and showing rigidity in our perception, design, and implementation of specific policies. (quoted in Thayer, 2008: 27)

The eighth plenum resolution thus provided the policy rationale for Vietnam to step up its relations with the United States, including security and defence cooperation (Thayer, 2005: 26–30).

## **VIETNAM'S FOREIGN POLICY, 2006–2010**

This section reviews Vietnam's pursuit of strategic partnerships in the period following the Tenth National Party Congress in 2006.

***Tenth National Congress.*** The VCP convened its Tenth National Party Congress in April 2006 (Thayer, 2007: 381–97). According to the Political Report, Vietnam will 'carry out the foreign policy of openness, multilateralization and diversification of international relations. To proactively integrate into the international economy and, at the same time, expand international co-operation in other domains' (*Eighty-five Years of The Communist Party of Viet Nam*, 2015: 1195). During this period, Vietnam successfully forged strategic partnerships with the major powers, East Asian and European states and ASEAN members.



**Japan: Strategic Partner.** On 19 October 2006, Prime Ministers Shinzo Abe and Nguyen Tan Dung issued a Joint Statement Toward a Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia (Thayer, 2012a: 207). This document called for frequent high-level visits and exchanges of views and the establishment of a ministerial-level Joint Cooperation Committee.

In November 2007, Nguyen Minh Triet became the first Vietnamese president to make an official visit to Japan. President Triet and Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda issued a Joint Statement that included a forty-four point Agenda Toward a Strategic Partnership, this agenda was divided into seven substantive areas: exchanges, cooperation in policy dialogue, security and defence; comprehensive economic partnership; improvement of the legal system and administrative reforms; science and technology; climate change, environment, natural resources and technology; mutual understanding between the peoples of the two countries; and cooperation in the international arena.

Point four of the Agenda addressed defence cooperation including exchanges of military delegations, high-level defence officials' visits, and goodwill ship port calls by the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF). In October 2011, the defence ministers from Japan and Vietnam met in Tokyo and signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that included defence exchanges at ministerial, chief of staff and service chief level; naval goodwill visits; annual defence policy dialogue at the deputy defence minister level; cooperation in military aviation, air defence, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief; and personnel training including scholarships for defence personnel to study and train in Japan.

In November 2011, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung visited Japan to reaffirm bilateral cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear power and to initiate a defence dialogue. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made a reciprocal visit to Hanoi in January 2013. This was Abe's first overseas visit since taking office.

**India: Strategic Partner.** In July 2007, India and Vietnam adopted a 33-point Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership that mapped out cooperation in five major areas: political, defence and security cooperation; closer economic cooperation and commercial engagement; science and technology cooperation; cultural and technical cooperation; and multilateral and regional cooperation (Thayer, 2012a: 208–9).

The Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership set out six areas for political, defence and security cooperation: strategic dialogue at vice ministerial level; defence supplies, joint projects, training cooperation and intelligence exchanges; exchange visits between their defence and security establishments; capacity building, technical assistance and information sharing with particular attention to security of sea lanes, anti-piracy, prevention of pollution and search and rescue; counter terrorism and cyber security; and non-traditional security (Thayer, 2012a: 208–9).

In October 2011, President Truong Tan Sang made a state visit to India to solicit diplomatic support and military assistance, including submarine and

pilot conversion training, modernization of Nha Trang port, and the transfer of medium-sized warships. During Sang's visit it was announced that Vietnam had awarded an oil-exploration contract to India's Oil and Natural Gas Company. In November 2013, VCP Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong also visited India (Thayer, 2013e, 2014b and 2014h).

**China: From Strategic Partner to Comprehensive Strategic Partner.** In June 2008, following a summit of party leaders in Beijing, China-Vietnam bilateral relations were raised to that of strategic partners (Thayer, 2012a: 210). A year later this was upgraded to a strategic cooperative partnership. As strategic partners China and Vietnam have developed a dense network of party, state, defence and multilateral mechanisms to manage their bilateral relations including a Joint Steering Committee at deputy prime minister level (Thayer, 2011b: 348–69).

**Republic of Korea: Strategic Cooperative Partnership.** In 1997, Presidents Nguyen Minh Triet and Lee Myung-bak met in Hanoi and raised their bilateral relations to a Strategic Cooperative Partnership. Under this agreement the two sides agreed to cooperate in politics and security, judicial and consular relations, economics, trade, investment, development cooperation, science and technology, environment and culture and education (Thayer, 2012a: 211). The two countries regularly exchange high-level visits, hold an annual strategic and national defence dialogue and conduct naval port visits. In September 2013 Vietnam hosted a visit by South Korean President Park Geun-hye.

**Australia: Comprehensive Partner.** In September 2009, the VCP Secretary General Nong Duc Manh visited Canberra (Thayer, 2012a: 212) and witnessed the signing of an agreement by Deputy Prime Ministers Julia Gillard and Pham Gia Khiem raising bilateral relations to a Comprehensive Partnership. This agreement highlighted six major areas of cooperation: political ties and public policy exchanges; economic growth and trade development; development assistance and technical cooperation; defence and security ties; people-to-people links; and global and regional agenda (Australia-Viet Nam Comprehensive Partnership, 2009). In October 2010, Australia and Vietnam agreed to a three-year Plan of Action to implement their comprehensive partnership.

Between 2009 and 2010 Vietnam concluded strategic partnership agreements with two European countries. The first agreement was reached with Spain in December 2009, during the course of an official visit to Madrid by President Nguyen Minh Triet (Vietnam News Agency, 2009). In September the following year Spain and Vietnam signed a MOU on defence cooperation between national defence industries and military education and training. Subsequently, the Vietnam-Spain strategic partnership languished due to Spain's economic woes.

Vietnam's second European strategic partnership was reached with the UK in September 2010. The agreement was signed in London by Foreign Secretary William Hague and Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Gia Khiem. This agreement included seven priority areas: political-diplomatic, regional and global issues, trade and investment, sustainable socio-economic



development, education, training, science and technology, security and defence, and people-to-people exchange (Diplomat highlights significance of VN-UK strategic partnership, 2010). Ministries from both countries were tasked with coordinating specific Action Plans for each priority area.

Vietnam and the UK held their first Strategic Dialogue in London on 26 October 2010. The following year, Vietnam and the UK signed a MOU on defence cooperation covering political-defence cooperation, research, and military equipment supply. On 28 March 2012, Vietnam and the UK signed the Action Plan to further their Strategic Partnership. The Action Plan included a provision for stepping up defence cooperation in training, defence trade and peace support operations.

**Multilateral Institutions.** During the period from 2006–2010, Vietnam made determined efforts to proactively integrate with the global system. Former Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien offered the assessment that Vietnam's foreign policy reached three peaks in 2006 – hosting the APEC summit, gaining membership in the WTO, and unanimous nomination by the Asia bloc for non-permanent membership on the United Nations Security Council (quoted in *Vietnam Economy*, 14 November 2006). In 2007, Vietnam was overwhelmingly elected by the UN General Assembly as a non-permanent member on the Security Council for a two-year period 2008–9. Vietnam served as ASEAN Chair and host for the inaugural meeting of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus in 2010. Vietnam also entered into negotiations to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

## VIETNAM'S FOREIGN POLICY, 2011–2016

In January 2011, the VCP convened its Eleventh National Party Congress. The congress adopted, inter alia, two major documents, the *Political Program for National Construction During the Period of Transition to Socialism* (Amended, Developed in 2011) and the Political Report of the party's Secretary General.

The Political Program called on Vietnam to

[C]onsistently implement a foreign policy of independence, self-reliance, peace, cooperation and development; diversify relations and actively integrate into the international community; enhance the country's position; strive for a prosperous and powerful socialist Viet Nam; be a reliable friend and partner and a responsible member of the international community, contribute to peace, national independence, democracy and social progress in the world. (*Eighty-five Years of The Communist Party of Viet Nam*, 2015:1226)

The Secretary General's Political Report highlighted the following strengths and weaknesses in national defence, security and foreign relations. Vietnam's strengths included paying

more attention [to] the co-ordination of national defense, security and external affairs... External relations have been broadened and further developed creating a new position of

strength for the country. This is demonstrated through the development of relations with neighboring countries and the establishment of relations frameworks [sic] with important partners. (*Eighty-five Years of The Communist Party of Viet Nam*, 2015:1263)

#### Vietnam's weaknesses included:

Socio-economic development has not been closely combined with strengthening national defense and security, especially in strategic regions such as seas and islands. Defence and security industry have not met the armed forces' needs.

Strategic research and forecasting on external relations has shown weaknesses in certain aspects. Coordination among the Party's external relations sphere, State diplomacy and people's diplomacy and among external politics, economy and culture have not been properly synchronized. (*Eighty-five Years of The Communist Party of Viet Nam*, 2015:1271–2)

The Political Report also set out the 'objectives and tasks' for the period from 2011–15. These included: 'increase external activities... [and] create foundations for our country to become a modernity-orientated [sic] industrial country by 2020'. The Political Report listed among its key tasks for the next five years: 'strengthen national defense and security potentials... [and] expand and raise the efficiency of external activities, actively and proactively engage in international integration' (*Eighty-five Years of The Communist Party of Viet Nam*, 2015: 1281).

Part nine of the Political Report was entirely devoted to foreign relations and proactive international integration. It repeated the same formulations in the Political Program. With respect to Southeast Asia, the Political Report called on Vietnam to

be proactive and responsible, and work together with other countries to build a strong ASEAN community, strengthen relations with partners, and continue to maintain an important role within the framework of cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region ... [and] expand participation in multilateral mechanisms and forums in the region and the world. (*Eighty-five Years of The Communist Party of Viet Nam*, 2015:1305)

Over the next five years Vietnam upgraded its strategic partnerships with Russia, Japan, India and Australia, reached agreement on comprehensive partnership with the United States, and negotiated seven new strategic partnerships with European and Southeast Asian states.

**Russia: Comprehensive Strategic Partner.** In July 2012, Vietnam and Russia raised their strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership on the occasion of a state visit by President Truong Tan Sang to Moscow as a guest of his counterpart Vladimir Putin (Thayer, 2012c). Putin paid a return visit to Vietnam in November 2013 (Thayer, 2013d).

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev visited Vietnam in April 2015 and witnessed the signing of eight cooperation agreements in the fields of energy (oil, gas, and nuclear), investment, banking (use of national currencies to promote bilateral trade), health care, transport (aviation and rail) and agriculture. Russia's Gazprom Neft signed a framework agreement to purchase 49 per cent of shares in Binh Son Refining and Petrochemical's Dung Quat refinery in central Vietnam.

Gazprom Neft and PetroVietnam (Vietnam National Oil and Gas Group) also signed a MOU on exploration and exploitation of oil and gas on Vietnam's continental shelf. Agreement was reached to proceed with the construction of the Ninh Thuan 1 Nuclear Power Plant with Russian participation (this was cancelled in 2016). In August 2016, Vietnam joined the Eurasian Economic Union comprising Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia. President Sang visited Moscow on 9 May 2015 to participate in activities commemorating the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

**Japan: Extensive Strategic Partner.** In March 2014, during President Truong Tan Sang's state visit to Japan the two sides raised their bilateral relations to an Extensive Strategic Partnership in an agreement running to sixty-nine paragraphs. As a follow up, Nguyen Phu Trong, Secretary General of the Vietnam Communist Party, made his first official visit to Japan at the invitation of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in September 2015. At the end of their talks the two leaders issued a thirty-one point Joint Vision Statement.

Under the Extensive Strategic Partnership Japan's MSDF has provided assistance to Vietnam to build up its maritime law enforcement capacity, including the gifting of patrol boats for the Vietnam Coast Guard (Thayer, 2014e).

**India: Strengthening Defence Relations.** In September 2014, India's President Pranab Mukherjee visited Vietnam and offered a US\$100 million line of credit for defence purchases. The following month Prime Minister Dung met his counterpart in New Delhi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, where it was announced that India would give priority to modernizing Vietnam's armed forces. India also offered a US\$300 million line of credit for Vietnam to purchase Indian goods. ONGC Videsh, India's state-owned oil company, took up Vietnam's offer of an additional oil exploration block in the South China Sea (Thayer, 2014b, 2014g, 2014h).

**Australia: Enhanced Comprehensive Partner.** Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung made an official visit to Australia in March 2015 to meet with his counterpart Prime Minister Tony Abbott (Thayer, 2015b, 2015c). The two leaders witnessed the signing of the Declaration on Enhancing the Australia-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership and agreed to establish a Strategic Partnership at a later date. Under the Declaration the two sides agreed to step up cooperation in five areas: bilateral political and diplomatic relations; regional and international cooperation; economic growth, trade and industry development; development assistance and defence, law enforcement and security ties.

**United States: Comprehensive Partner.** In 2013, Vietnam and the United States issued a joint statement raising their bilateral relations to a Comprehensive Partnership. This agreement was announced in July during the state visit by President Truong Tan Sang to Washington (Thayer, 2013a). The joint statement on Comprehensive Partnership included nine major points most of which reiterated existing mechanisms for cooperation. These included: the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement Council; the Joint Committee for Scientific and Technological Cooperation; the Defense Policy Dialogue; and the Political,

Security, and Defense Dialogue. Nonetheless, the Comprehensive Partnership created a new political and diplomatic dialogue mechanism between the US Secretary of State and Vietnam's Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The joint statement on Comprehensive Partnership made no mention of a Plan of Action that accompanied many of Vietnam's other strategic partnership agreements. Instead, the Joint Statement noted that the two governments would create new mechanisms for each of the nine areas of cooperation: political and diplomatic relations, trade and economic ties, science and technology, education and training, environment and health, war legacy issues, defence and security, protection and promotion of human rights, and culture, sports, and tourism.

Maritime security issues featured prominently in Vietnam–US relations, particularly as a result of tensions arising from China's deployment of the HD-981 oil platform in Vietnam's EEZ, discussed below (Thayer, 2014c). In short order, in October 2013, Vietnam and the United States reached agreement on cooperation between the two Coast Guards and cooperation on the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes (Thayer, 2013c). In December 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry announced that the United States would provide Vietnam with US\$18 million to assist the capacity of the Vietnam Coast Guard to conduct search and rescue, disaster and other maritime security missions.

In 2014, during a major crisis in Vietnam–China relations (discussed below), Vietnam dispatched two members of its Politburo to the United States. In July, Pham Quang Nghi travelled to Washington for discussions with senior Obama Administration officials. Nghi was followed in October by Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh who conferred with Secretary of State John Kerry. During Minh's visit Kerry announced that the United States had lifted the restriction on the sale of lethal weapons to Vietnam on a case-by-case basis to assist in maritime domain awareness and maritime security capabilities (Thayer, 2014d). In March 2015, Minister for Public Security and Politburo member, Tran Dai Quang met with a range of senior officials in the Obama Administration.

In June 2015, bilateral defence cooperation witnessed a major advance when the defence ministers of Vietnam and the United States, Phung Quang Thanh and Ashton Carter, adopted the Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations. A month later US–Vietnam political relations were raised to a new level with the adoption of a Joint Vision Statement on 7 July by President Obama and VCP Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong. This was the first visit by the leader of the Vietnam Communist Party to the United States.

***New European Strategic Partners.*** In October 2011, President Tran Dai Quang and Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel reached an agreement on strategic partnership during her state visit to Hanoi. This was Vietnam's third strategic partnership with a European country. The two sides agreed to increase the exchange of high-ranking delegations including government and parliamentary agencies, political parties and scientific and strategic research institutes (Vietnam News Agency, 2011).

Vietnam's fourth strategic partnership with a European country was reached with Italy during the course of a visit by VCP Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong in January 2013. The agreement contained six areas of cooperation: political-diplomatic; global and regional issues; economic relations; development assistance; cultural, education and training, scientific and technological cooperation; and defence and security (Vietnam News Agency, 2013).

Vietnam's fifth strategic partnership with a European country was reached with France during the official visit of Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung to Paris in September 2013. This agreement provided for cooperation in the following areas: diplomacy; national defence and security; economic relations, trade and investment; development assistance; and culture, education and training, scientific research, and law and justice (Vietnam Plus, 26 December 2013).

***Strategic Partners in Southeast Asia.*** During 2013–15 Vietnam negotiated strategic partnership agreements with four ASEAN members: Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines.

In June 2013, Vietnam and Thailand agreed to elevate bilateral relations to a strategic partnership following a meeting between Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and VCP Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong. This marked Vietnam's first strategic partnership with an ASEAN member. The agreement included five areas: political cooperation (high-level visits and strategic political dialogues); defence and security cooperation (traditional and non-traditional security challenges and consular affairs); economic cooperation (trade, investment, agriculture, energy, telecommunications, information technology and transport); social, cultural, people-to-people cooperation; and regional and international cooperation (particularly ASEAN centrality, ASEAN Community, and the Mekong Forum). Vietnam and Thailand also agreed on a Plan of Action to implement the strategic partnership; the first meeting of their Joint Commission was held in November 2013.

In June 2013, immediately after Secretary General Trong's trip to Thailand, President Truong Tan Sang made a state visit to Indonesia for discussions with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. The two leaders agreed to raise bilateral relations to a strategic partnership and to exchange high-level visits and cooperate in the following areas: defence and security; trade and investment; sustainable food and energy; fisheries and aquaculture; people-to-people links; ASEAN Community-building; and the peaceful resolution of South China Sea disputes.

In September 2013, Vietnam and Singapore raised their bilateral relations to a strategic partnership during the course of an official visit to Hanoi by Prime Minister Lee Hisen Loong. The agreement covered five major areas: deepening mutual trust in political relations; boosting economic cooperation; increasing cooperation in security–defence; promoting bilateral ties in education, law, health, culture, art and sports; and intensifying cooperation at regional and international forums.

In May 2014, Vietnam and the Philippines set up a Joint Working Committee charged with drawing up a road map for an agreement on a strategic partnership after discussions in Manila between President Benigno Aquino and his guest, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung. In November 2014, when Presidents Aquino and Sang met on the sidelines of the 22nd APEC Leaders' Summit in Beijing, they agreed to convene the first meeting of the Joint Commission on Concluding a Strategic Partnership. The inaugural meeting of the Joint Commission was held in Manila on 30 January 2015 between the Secretary of Foreign Affairs Albert del Rosario and his Vietnamese counterpart Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh. In November 2015, del Rosario and Minh signed an agreement on strategic partnership on behalf of their respective governments on the sidelines of a bilateral meeting between Presidents Aquino and Truong Tan Sang at the APEC Summit in Manila.

## **SOUTH CHINA SEA: LOSS OF STRATEGIC TRUST**

A major maritime confrontation erupted between China and Vietnam from 2 May to 16 July 2014 when China deployed a mega oil exploration platform, Hai Yang Shi You 981 (HD 981), in Vietnam's EEZ. Bilateral relations plunged to their lowest level since the 1979 border war. Throughout May all Vietnamese attempts to make contact with their counterparts in China, either through hot lines or direct contact by the agencies concerned, were rebuffed.

The VCP Central Committee convened its previously scheduled ninth plenum from 8–14 May 2014. This meeting witnessed heated discussions behind closed doors. After the meeting it was reported that the Central Committee called for a peaceful resolution of the dispute and resolved to closely monitor the maritime standoff. On 18 June 2014 China dispatched State Councilor Yang Jiechi to Hanoi for testy consultations with Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh at a 'leaders meeting' of the Joint Steering Committee on Bilateral Cooperation.

In early July 2014, the VCP Politburo reportedly voted overwhelmingly to hold a meeting of the Central Committee in August to endorse international legal action against China. A group of Central Committee members, responding to anti-China public pressure, sought to include on the meeting's agenda a resolution calling on Vietnam to 'exit China's orbit' and abandon Vietnam's 'three no's' defence policy. However, before the Central Committee could convene, China brought an abrupt end to the crisis by withdrawing the HD 981. Nonetheless, on 28 July sixty-one leading Vietnamese personalities signed an open letter criticizing the government for its handling of relations with Beijing and called for legal action and a lessening of Vietnam's dependence on China.

In August 2014, Vietnam dispatched Le Hong Anh, a special envoy of the VCP Secretary General and member of the Politburo, to Beijing where he was



received by Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. Anh presented an invitation to Secretary General/President Xi to visit Vietnam. The following month a high-powered Vietnamese military delegation led by Minister of National Defence and member of the Politburo General Phung Quang Thanh visited Beijing (Thayer, 2014f, 2015a). Shortly after these visits Councilor Yang returned to Vietnam to co-chair the seventh Joint Steering Committee on Bilateral Cooperation where both sides agreed to reset their relations (Thayer, 2014h). Nonetheless, in December 2014, Vietnam filed a statement of interest with the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague requesting that Vietnam's interests be taken into account during deliberations by the Arbitral Tribunal on the case brought by the Philippines against China (Thayer, 2014i).

On 7 April 2015, Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong flew to Beijing to meet with General Secretary Xi and other high-level Chinese leaders. After the Xi-Trong meeting a joint communiqué stated that the leaders 'reached broad common perceptions on intensifying ties between the two Parties and countries in the new context'. The joint communiqué further stated:

They [China and Vietnam] need to consistently respect each other, hold sincere consultations and manage differences; As political trust is a foundation for the healthy and stable development of bilateral ties, both sides need to increase visits and exchanges, from the strategic heights, carrying the bilateral ties forward; win-win cooperation between Vietnam and China brings practical benefits to people in both countries and contributing to peace, development and prosperity in the region, which should be enhanced and deepened across sectors. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015)

The two leaders decided to reset the clock back to October 2013 and understandings reached on the vexed issue of the South China Sea dispute during the visit of Premier Le Keqiang to Hanoi (Thayer, 2014a). Xi and Trong agreed to comply with and seriously implement the 'Agreement on Basic Principles Guiding the Settlement of Vietnam-China Sea-related Issues' through the already established government-level negotiation mechanism on Vietnam-China boundary and territorial issues. The leaders further agreed to 'manage disputes at sea' and 'fully and effectively' implement the 2002 Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and to reach agreement on a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

**Twelfth National Party Congress.** In January 2016, on the eve of the VCP's Twelfth National Congress, Vietnam's Cabinet approved the *Overall Strategy for International Integration Through 2020, Vision to 2030* [Chiến lược tổng thể hội nhập quốc tế đến năm 2020, tầm nhìn 2030] (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2016). This document reviewed Vietnam's bilateral strategic and comprehensive partnerships with twenty-five countries. It concluded that Vietnam had to make greater efforts to implement political commitments and to deepen cooperation under these agreements, with a special emphasis on defence and security cooperation.

Later that month, the Political Report tabled at the Twelfth National Congress stated, 'To ensure successful implementation of foreign policy and international

integration ... consistently carry out the foreign policy of independence, autonomy, peace, cooperation and development ... [and] diversify and multilateralize external relations' (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2016).

In the year following the twelfth congress Vietnam's top leaders visited Russia and China and hosted visits by the presidents of the United States and France and the prime minister of India. Vietnam also utilized ASEAN and APEC summit meetings to hold discussions with their counterparts on the sidelines. In 2016, Vietnam also exchanged visits by defence ministers with Russia, China and India and hosted a visit by the French defence minister.

From 23–25 May 2016, President Barack Obama made an official visit to Vietnam at the invitation of President Tran Dai Quang. In Hanoi Obama announced the lifting of all restrictions on arms sales to Vietnam. In their joint statement on 23 May, the two presidents set out six areas for future defence cooperation: humanitarian cooperation (recovery of the remains of soldiers missing in action); war legacy (unexploded ordnance, dioxin remediation); maritime security; UN peacekeeping; humanitarian assistance and disaster relief; and securing and defence cooperation.

In early September 2016, Prime Minister Modi made an official visit to Vietnam. After discussions with his counterpart Prime Minister Phuc, the two leaders announced that they were raising their bilateral relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership. Modi offered Vietnam a US\$500 million Line of Credit for unspecified defence purchases and US\$5 million to set up a military information technology software park in Nha Trang. During Modi's visit Vietnam's Border Guard and India's Larson & Toubro Ltd signed a contract for the construction and delivery for four Ocean Patrol Vessels under a US\$100 million Line of Credit offered in 2014.

From 5–7 September, President Francois Hollande made an official visit to Vietnam for discussions with his counterpart, President Tran Dai Quang. On 6 September Quang and Hollande held a joint press conference where they announced agreement 'to develop a long-term vision for cooperation that could ensure their common interests. To do that, political connections [*sic*] need first to be tightened'.

In 2016, Rodrigo Duterte assumed the presidency of the Philippines. He paid an official visit to Hanoi in September at the invitation of President Quang. After discussions Foreign Affairs Secretary Perfecto Yasay announced that the Philippines and Vietnam agreed on a six-year strategic partnership that would include rice trade, agricultural information exchanges, construction, and oil and gas exploration among others.

Relations between Vietnam and China intensified after the twelfth congress, especially in defence and security cooperation. For example, defence ministers from Vietnam and China co-hosted the third Border Defence Friendship Exchange in March. This involved an exchange of visits by each defence minister. During the visit of China's defence minister to Hanoi the two sides signed an MOU on

cooperation in UN peacekeeping operations. In August, Vietnam's new Defence Minister, General Ngo Xuan Lich led a high-level defence delegation on his first official visit to China at the invitation of his counterpart, Sr Lt General Chang.

In September, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc made an official visit to Beijing and then attended the 13th China-ASEAN Expo in Nanning. During his stop in Beijing, Phuc met with Premier Le Keqiang. The two government leaders issued a joint communiqué that spelled out cooperation in a wide variety of areas. In January 2017 VCP Secretary General Trong made an official visit to Beijing for discussions with his counterpart Xi Jinping. The two party leaders agreed that their bilateral relations should not be held hostage to their territorial dispute in the South China Sea. The joint communiqué issued after their discussions listed five areas of cooperation: implementation of a five-year cooperation plan, 2016–20; strengthening of exchanges in diplomacy, defence, security and law enforcement; promote results-orientated trade and commerce; promote people-to-people links; and the use of already established government-level mechanisms to resolve territorial disputes peacefully (Vietnam News Agency, 2017). During Trong's visit representatives of the two sides signed fifteen cooperation agreements including economic relations, transportation, defence, health care, tourism and education and training.

Vietnam also availed itself of the opportunities offered by multilateral summits to meet the leaders of strategic partners. In September 2016, Prime Ministers Nguyen Xuan Phuc and Shinzo Abe met on the sidelines of the ASEAN summit in Vientiane. In November, President Tran Dai Quang met with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on the sidelines of the APEC summit in Lima, Peru.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter analysed Vietnam's foreign policy over the last four and a half decades following Vietnam's extrication from the conflict in Cambodia in 1991 until 2016. In 1991 Vietnam jettisoned the view that the world was divided into hostile socialist and capitalist camps and replaced this with a view that there was one global economy. Vietnam now began to adopt a more positive outlook on developing relations with non-socialist states and global economic integration.

Nevertheless, a leitmotif of 'old political thinking' continues to dog Vietnam's pursuit of relations with the major powers and proactive integration. There are two recurrent themes: the United States seeks to undermine Vietnam's socialist system through 'peaceful evolution', and socialist ideology is a link that binds China and Vietnam.

This chapter analysed Vietnam's foreign policy in three distinct periods. In the first period, from 1991–2005, Vietnam sought to multilateralize and diversify its foreign relations by normalizing its relations with China and Southeast Asian states. The year 1995 was pivotal as Vietnam succeeded in normalizing

relations with the United States and becoming ASEAN's seventh member. In 1998 Vietnam became a member of APEC. Finally, in 2001, Vietnam and Russia revived bilateral relations in the form of a strategic partnership and Vietnam and the United States signed a Bilateral Trade Agreement.

During the second period, from 2006–10, Vietnam pursued the diversification and multilateralization of its external relations in the form of strategic partnerships and by proactively pursuing international integration. Vietnam's new strategic/comprehensive partners included Japan, India, China (upgraded to comprehensive strategic partner and then comprehensive strategic cooperative partner), South Korea, Spain, the UK and Australia. A crowning success for Vietnam in this period was its election as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council.

During the third period, from 2011–16, Vietnam upgraded its strategic/comprehensive partnerships with Russia, Japan, India and Australia and proactively forged new strategic partnerships with Germany, Italy, France, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines. After the twelfth national party congress, Vietnam sought to address shortcomings in several of its strategic partnerships that it felt were not living up to expectations. At the same time, Vietnam stepped up defence diplomacy with its strategic partners. The purpose of Vietnam's strategic partnerships is to give each partner equity in Vietnam to prevent Vietnam from being pulled into a rival's orbit and thus enable Vietnam to maintain its strategic autonomy.

In summary, Vietnam's foreign policy is aimed at bolstering its independence in external affairs and avoid being caught in the strategic rivalry of China and the United States. When taken as a whole, Vietnam's web of strategic and comprehensive partnerships serves to insulate Vietnam from Sino-US competition and provide Vietnam with the means to manoeuvre among the major powers in order to protect its independence and self-reliance.

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