

# Vietnam's Persistent Foreign Policy Dilemma: Caught between Self-Reliance and Proactive Integration

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This essay argues that “self-reliance” and “proactive international integration”—the two driving concepts in Vietnamese foreign policy since the Doi Moi (open door) era—are increasingly difficult to reconcile in the wake of China’s pursuit of regional and global dominance.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

Vietnam’s partial reforms to its foreign policy have created an ideological dilemma between the contending conceptions of self-reliance and proactive international integration. The country’s foreign policy shift toward greater international political and economic integration since the Doi Moi era in the late 1980s has contributed to its postwar development and re-established the country’s position in the international arena. The reforms responded to the main threat of the time: regime collapse and economic disaster. The full expression of this change in defense policy has been restrained by the Vietnamese Communist Party’s adherence to the principle of self-reliance. While sustaining an independent foreign policy has been a strength for Vietnam in the past, self-reliance has limited alignment options in defense policies. Despite the overall accomplishments of diplomacy and the expanding areas of security cooperation, they seem disproportionately small in comparison with the challenges that Hanoi is facing. In the wake of growing tensions in Vietnam’s neighborhood, especially in the South China Sea, the main security challenges are now threats to sovereignty. Vietnam urgently needs to recalibrate and open its foreign and defense policies in response to the pressing challenges to its territorial integrity.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Unlike in the Doi Moi era, today Vietnam’s top priority increasingly is the defense of sovereignty—particularly given China’s unilateral actions in the South China Sea.
- Integration rescued the Vietnamese economy and re-legitimized the socialist regime, but the government now fears deepening security relations because of its long-held value of self-reliance.
- Given the positive trajectory of security cooperation with Japan, the U.S., India, and Australia, Vietnam should develop a policy that includes advanced security cooperation—in the form of new “yes’s” that serve national interests. This would be a positive addition to the existing policy of “three no’s.”

While most existing assessments of Vietnam attribute the country's economic and foreign policy success to the Doi Moi policy (renovation policy, also known in the country as the “open door” policy), this essay argues that Vietnamese foreign policy is still obstructed by older revolutionist sentiments. Because of the long-held attachment of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) to the concept of “self-reliance,” there is a deep resistance to fuller international integration, which in Hanoi's official language figures as “proactive international integration” (also often referred to as “total integration”). This impasse is impeding Vietnam's complete integration into global affairs and limits its strategic options.

In the 1980s, economic hardship pushed Vietnam to relax its ideological worldview in favor of a more pragmatic approach to managing its economy and political relations. After successfully defending threats to the country's sovereignty, the CPV faced the challenge of regime survival in the wake of the crumbling Soviet bloc and poor economic management. The Doi Moi transformation of Vietnam's foreign policy in the late 1980s and 1990s was advocated as a necessity—either “reform or die”—and was effective in responding to the challenges the country faced at that time: economic and ideological survival. But the policy's relative success has made Hanoi elites complacent and resistant to further reform that would address Vietnam's current strategic needs.

The circumstances that Vietnam faces today are different and require more “opening” in the security sector to protect national interests. Sovereignty challenges are again at the forefront. A competitive international environment and regional instability pose new challenges in terms of the escalation of long-term issues, such as China's militarization of the South China Sea and North Korea's nuclear crisis, and emerging issues, such as the United States' trade war against China and possible retrenchment from the region. These developments have created an atmosphere where diplomacy and economic integration are no longer a sufficient defensive tool. Hence, Vietnam's first priority should be protecting its sovereignty, both territorial and economic. To achieve this goal, Hanoi no longer can afford to rely on foreign policy playing the same role in national defense that it has thus far. With growing pressure from China in particular, and related to shifting geopolitics in general, Vietnam potentially faces renewed isolation, primarily in security rather than in diplomacy and economics.

This essay examines Vietnam's key dilemma in foreign and defense thinking since the beginning of Doi Moi: the tension between proactive international integration and self-reliance. The policy most representative

of self-reliance is the “three no’s,” which prevent Vietnam from hosting any foreign bases, committing to formal alliances, or teaming up with any one actor against another. The full expression of Doi Moi has been restrained by the CPV’s adherence to that narrowly understood principle of self-reliance. This essay argues that Hanoi needs to grow beyond the diplomatic and economic success of Doi Moi to adapt the country’s security policies and ideologies to accommodate the new regional environment.

- ≈ pp. 126–34 examine the motives behind Doi Moi and the integration reforms undertaken since the 1980s. This section also explains how the CPV reformed itself to preserve party legitimacy but has since rested on these reforms with little inclination to expand them outside the political economic realm.
- ≈ pp. 134–42 address the stagnation in foreign and defense policy and demonstrate that there has been little change to policy in this arena since the reform era, despite the shifting international environment.
- ≈ pp. 142–44 conclude with a call for Vietnam to better tailor its foreign and defense policies to meet the challenge of a rapidly widening power gap with China as well as Beijing’s increasingly assertive ambitions that may contradict its commitment to good neighborliness.

#### DOI MOI AND INCOMPLETE INTERNATIONAL INTEGRATION—“REFORM OR DIE!”

Following the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975, the country’s diplomatic situation became arguably even worse than during the war. The Sino-Soviet split resulted in a deterioration of Hanoi’s relations with Beijing and as a consequence with the socialist camp.<sup>1</sup> International sanctions, minimal external development aid, and wars with neighbors Cambodia in 1978 and China in 1979 put the economy on the verge of collapse. By the 1980s, the government’s attempts at central planning had devastated the economy and created a situation in which some three million people were near starvation and another five million or more were malnourished.<sup>2</sup> The external limitations of economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation were compounded by many internal challenges, including the recovery of industries from years

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<sup>1</sup> Conflict with Cambodia and China also affected Vietnam’s relations with other countries in the socialist camp. See Tuong Vu, *Vietnam’s Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 243–45.

<sup>2</sup> Melanie Beresford, “Doi Moi in Review: The Challenges of Building Market Socialism in Vietnam,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38, no. 2 (2008): 221–43.

of war and the reunification of two very dissimilar polities and economies in North and South Vietnam after 1975.

After China and the Soviet Union underwent structural reforms under Deng Xiaoping in 1978 and Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985, respectively, Hanoi pursued economic liberalization policies during the 6th National Congress of the CPV. As then CPV secretary Truong Chinh stated, “the party must reform or die.”<sup>3</sup> The Doi Moi reforms were thus introduced not by choice but as a necessity.

On May 20, 1988, the Politburo adopted Resolution No. 13, the key document that determined the transformation of Vietnamese foreign relations. It recognized that economic weaknesses came from diplomatic isolation and that Vietnam must engage with the world to survive. The CPV thus embarked on ideological adjustments: foreign policy was no longer based on the confrontational thinking of *ai thang ai*, which presupposes fixed camps of “us” and “enemies.”<sup>4</sup> Instead of regularly labeling a state as a “partner” (of cooperation), if it shared the same ideology as Vietnam, or a “target” (of competition), the new policy was to become friends and partners with everyone under the policy of *them ban bot thu* (more friends, fewer enemies).<sup>5</sup> Hence, Hanoi’s view of other actors was no longer solely based on ideological affinity but on the individual context relevant to its national interests. The change represented a revision from defense-driven to cooperation-driven thinking in foreign policy. As one of the key Vietnamese political thinkers put it, the new priority was “to allow the conduct of a new foreign policy to play a bigger role in ensuring national security and supporting the economic development of Vietnam.”<sup>6</sup>

In the domestic narrative, diplomacy has been increasingly credited with achieving the major milestones in Vietnam’s history, including independence, sovereignty, national unity, territorial integrity, socialism,

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<sup>3</sup> This is a famous dictum of the late general secretary of the CPV, Truong Chinh, in 1986.

<sup>4</sup> *Ai thang ai* means “who will win over whom.” This concept appeared in the writings of Stalin that became popular in Vietnamese texts on Marxism-Leninism and refers to the competition between the socialist and capitalist camps. For further discussion, see Eero Palmujoki, *Vietnam and the World: Marxist-Leninist Doctrine and the Changes in International Relations 1975–1993* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), 30–33.

<sup>5</sup> Ta Ngoc Tan, “Theoretical Achievements of Vietnam Communist Party over 85 Years of Leading Vietnam’s Revolution,” *Communist Review*, April 6, 2015, 5. *Them ban bot thu* is a return to Ho Chi Minh’s idea from the 1940s. “Them ban bot thu: Nguyen tac chien luoc trong tu tuong ngoai giao Ho Chi Minh” [More Friends, Fewer Enemies: The Strategic Principle in Ho Chi Minh’s Foreign Policy Thinking], *Ly Luan Chinh Tri*, April 24, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Nguyen Vu Tung, “Vietnam’s Security Challenges: Hanoi’s New Approach to National Security and Implications to Defense and Foreign Policies,” in *Asia Pacific Countries’ Security Outlook and Its Implications for the Defense Sector* (Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies, 2011), 107.

and political stability.<sup>7</sup> This view was further developed at the 7th National Congress in 1991 through the concept of “omnidirectional diplomacy,” whereby the CPV formalized its active pursuit of building and expanding relationships with all countries regardless of their political systems, emphasizing both bilateral and multilateral networks. Through the improvement of foreign relations, the now-unified Vietnam normalized relations with former adversaries.

Foreign policy advanced immensely in the following years to the degree that some concluded that it was the area that benefited the most from the Doi Moi reforms.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the effect of reform on Vietnam’s foreign policy was faster than in other domains. Yet this is an incomplete picture. Analysts often fail to notice the nuanced, but prevailing, resistance to the deep integration and economic opening that could compromise Vietnam’s socialist political orientation. Restoring diplomatic ties became a necessity for improving Vietnam’s international economic conditions. In the mainstream domestic assessment, the most meaningful accomplishments in foreign relations resulting from the reorientation were largely political and economic: undoing sanctions and embargoes; pacifying the neighborhood; establishing positive relations with the big powers, particularly the United States, Japan, India, Great Britain, Germany, and France; and participating in an economic network of trade agreements and multilateral economic integration schemes.<sup>9</sup> By the late 1990s and early 2000s, the gradual expansion of bilateral ties, as well as membership in regional and global multilateral institutions, earned Vietnam a new reputation as an active participant in the international community. Vietnamese foreign policy thinking and vocabulary have also expanded to include the important concepts of comprehensive, strategic, and comprehensive cooperative strategic partnerships. While there is a certain

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<sup>7</sup> Vu Manh Tri, “Lam ro them quan diem, duong loi doi ngoai va chu dong hop nhat quoc te cua Dang, nha nuoc ta” [Clarifying Our Party’s and State’s Viewpoint, Pathways for Foreign Policy, Proactive International Integration], *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, January 22, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Carlyle A. Thayer and Ramses Amer, eds., *Vietnam’s Foreign Policy in Transition* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies [ISEAS], 1999); Hong Anh Tuan, “Doi Moi and the Remaking of Vietnam,” *Global Asia* 43, no. 3 (2012); Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vietnam’s Foreign Policy in an Era of Rising Sino-U.S. Competition and Increasing Domestic Political Influence,” *Asian Security* 13, no. 3 (2017); Zachary Abuza, “Institutions and Actions in Vietnamese Foreign Policy-making: A Research Note,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 19, no. 3 (1997); Eero Palmujoki, “Vietnam’s Integration into the World National and Global Interfaces,” in *Vietnam’s New Order: International Perspectives on the State and Reform in Vietnam*, ed. Stephanie Balme and Mark Sidel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Pham Quang Minh, *Chinh sach doi ngoai Doi Moi cua Viet Nam 1986–2010* [Vietnam’s Foreign Policy of the Doi Moi Era 1986–2010] (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban, 2012); and Le Hong Hiep and Anton Tsvetov, eds., *Vietnam’s Foreign Policy under Doi Moi* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> “Vietnam’s Achievements in Foreign Affairs in the Past 5 Years,” *Communist Review*, March 24, 2016.

gradation in these types—comprehensive cooperative strategic partnerships being the highest level—there is a degree of flexibility in the definition of each type of partnership.<sup>10</sup> A comprehensive partnership is a political agreement that aims to enhance bilateral relations across a wide range of activities. A strategic partnership, by contrast, is a flexible agreement that does not necessarily include a security and defense component, though it does include an assurance from countries not to attack or join alliances against each other and not to interfere in each other's internal affairs.<sup>11</sup> Today, Vietnam has established diplomatic relations with 188 countries, strategic partnerships with 16 countries, and comprehensive partnerships with 10 countries (see **Table 1**) and is negotiating 16 free trade agreements (FTAs).<sup>12</sup> In addition, it has established economic and trade relations with more than 220 countries and territories and 66 countries recognize it as a market economy.<sup>13</sup> All of this is the hard-earned fruit of its active foreign policy.

### *Integration as a Remedy*

The Doi Moi policies have been credited with creating opportunities that the previously isolated Vietnamese people had been lacking. International integration was a remedy for a stagnant economy, boosted the state's international prestige, and allowed people to access global information and communication resources. By the 2000s, “integration” had become a buzzword in all aspects of life. In fact, Vu Khoan, the former secretary of the Central Committee of the CPV and former deputy prime minister, observed that “one of the most commonly used words in the Vietnamese language nowadays is ‘integration.’”<sup>14</sup> The Politburo resolution on international economic integration from November 27, 2001, opened the door to the negotiation of Vietnam's eventual accession to the World Trade Organization in 2007.

The push for international integration has since become the main focus of Vietnam's foreign policy. The 11th National Congress of the CPV in 2011

<sup>10</sup> Lewis M. Stern, “The New Vietnamese Vocabulary for Foreign and Defence Relations,” East-West Center, Asia Pacific Bulletin, no. 253, March 18, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> See Huong Le Thu, “Bumper Harvest in 2013 for Vietnamese Diplomacy,” *ISEAS Perspective*, January 23, 2014; and Carlyle A. Thayer, “The U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership: What's in a Name?” Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), Strategist, July 31, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Author's compilation based on data from Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>13</sup> See the website of the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>14</sup> See “Hoi nhap quoc te cua Viet Nam qua trinh phat trien nhan thuc, thanh tuu trong thuc tien va mot so yeu cau dat ra” [Vietnam's International Integration: Process, Development, Recognition, and Achievements in Implementation and a Number of Issues Put Forward], *Ho Chi Minh Academy of Politics Periodical*, March 28, 2017.

TABLE 1  
*Vietnam's Partnerships*

Country	Type of partnership	Year
Argentina	Comprehensive	2010
Australia	Comprehensive; upgraded to strategic	2009 2018
Brazil	Comprehensive	2007
Chile	Comprehensive	2007
China	Strategic; upgraded to comprehensive cooperative strategic	2008
Denmark	Comprehensive	2013
France	Strategic	2013
Germany	Strategic	2011
India	Strategic; upgraded to comprehensive strategic	2007 2016
Indonesia	Strategic	2013
Italy	Strategic	2013
Japan	Strategic; upgraded to extensive strategic	2009 2018
Malaysia	Strategic	2015
New Zealand	Comprehensive	2009
Philippines	Strategic	2015
Russia	Strategic; upgraded to comprehensive strategic	2001 2012
Singapore	Strategic	2013
Spain	Strategic	2009
South Africa	Comprehensive	2004
South Korea	Strategic	2009
Thailand	Strategic	2013
Ukraine	Comprehensive	2011
United Kingdom	Strategic	2010
United States	Comprehensive; upgraded to enhanced comprehensive	2013 2017
Venezuela	Comprehensive	2007

Source: Data compiled from the official website of Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

advocated for “synchronous, comprehensive and effective external activities” in all bilateral and multilateral channels, including through state diplomacy, parliamentary foreign affairs, and people-to-people diplomacy.<sup>15</sup> The 12th National Congress in 2016 did not alter that vision. Building on the positive trajectory of Vietnam’s foreign policy, the CPV leaders set as the priority to “guarantee that international integration is a matter of the entire political system of Vietnam.”<sup>16</sup> The aim is to reach “full and modern” economic integration through the “Strategy for International Integration through 2020, Vision to 2030,” which includes participation in several trade agreements: the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Vietnam–Eurasian Economic Union FTA, the Vietnam-EU Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, the Vietnam-EU FTA, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, and a Vietnam-Israel FTA. The strategy affirmed that “the overall objective of international integration through 2030 is to strengthen national aggregated strength.”<sup>17</sup> But the exact meaning of “aggregated strength” still remains unclear. What often descriptively accompanies that notion is being flexible, smart, and open to appropriate adjustments to ensure the country’s security, development, and rising position.

The language in party documents from 2017 on the role and approach to diplomacy does not differ much from the early period of reforms: “Vietnam is a reliable friend and partner and responsible member of the international community” that “proactively and positively contributes to building and shaping multilateral mechanisms” and “promote[s] and deepen[s] relations with partners, especially strategic partners and big countries having an important role for national development and security.”<sup>18</sup> The renewed leadership of the CPV at the 12th National Congress repeatedly emphasized the need to “diversify and multilateralize international economic relations to avoid dependence on one specific market and partner...or unbalanced interdependence.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> 11th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Resolution No. 22 (Hanoi, April 10 2013).

<sup>16</sup> “Ban Chấp Hành Trung Ương Khoa xi, Đại Hội XII của Đảng 2016” [Executive Committee of the Central Committee, 12th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam 2016] (Hanoi, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Office of the Prime Minister (Vietnam) “The Overall Strategy on International Integration through 2020, Vision to 2030,” issued with Decision No. 40 (Hanoi, January 7, 2016). The CPV’s definition of “aggregated strength” understands it as the sum of the following four components: (1) The CPV’s position, role, and wise leadership, (2) Vietnamese values, especially patriotism and strength of national unity, (3) economic, cultural, defense, security, and science-technology potential, and (4) Vietnam’s position in the international arena. See Thai Van Long, “Criteria for Assessing the Relation between Independence and Self-Reliance and Proactive and Active International Integration,” *Communist Review*, no. 898, August 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Documents of the 12th National Congress, Party Central Committee Office (Hanoi, 2016), 153–55.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

*Policy Duality: Schizophrenia or Managing Contradictions?*

While most mainstream analysis is content with the above achievements of Doi Moi, my position is that the changes were incomplete and the reforms were actually a creative way to preserve socialism. The reforms responded to pressing needs, but with the ultimate purpose of sustaining the Communist regime, which otherwise could have either collapsed, like those in the Eastern Bloc, or suffered economic and diplomatic isolation, like those in Cuba and North Korea. Instead, Vietnam chose “the third way”—a similar path to China’s—by rescuing its economy through partial reforms. Adoption of the Doi Moi policies was not an absolute win for the reformists, but more an overall concession that if such measures were not taken, socialism in Vietnam would have failed. What Doi Moi actually brought was an end to doctrinal unity rather than fundamental change. In that sense, it was a compromise.

Understanding that the reforms were a necessity rather than a progressive choice helps explain the current ongoing inconsistencies in Vietnam’s policies, including its foreign policy. These inconsistencies did not come from the leaders’ intellectual initiatives but were the result of changing domestic and international conditions.<sup>20</sup> While Doi Moi certainly created space for new concepts and charted a new foreign policy direction, including setting the course for normalization with China in 1991 and the United States in 1995, as well as with regional neighbors, CPV leaders stayed faithful to the socialist cause. “Vietnam and China were both socialist states facing an imperialist conspiracy to overthrow socialism. The two countries must join forces against imperialism,” wrote Tran Quang Co, the then deputy minister of foreign affairs, in 1990.<sup>21</sup> According to the party’s logic, the success of reforms is a key factor for socialism to prevail because the party has dealt with problematic issues and tailored its foreign policy to improve the investment environment.<sup>22</sup>

These socialist convictions remained strong despite the era of “openness.” Yet while Doi Moi foreign policy is most commonly depicted as aiming to improve Vietnam’s international standing and boost the economy, there were inherent limitations to how much opening the CPV would allow. Despite the

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<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that there was resistance from within the Politburo. The reformists advocating for Doi Moi were not in the top positions of the ruling party but managed to gain momentum. For more analysis, see David W.P. Elliott, *Changing Worlds: Vietnam’s Transition from Cold War to Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Tran Quang Co, *Hoi uc va suy nghi* [Memoir and Reflections] (Hanoi: NXB, 2005), 16–17.

<sup>22</sup> “Cuong ling xay dung dat nuoc trong thoi ky qua do len Chu nghia xa hoi” [Party Program to Build the Country During the Transition Period to Socialism], *Communist Review*, 1991, 31–34.

lofty goal of “total integration,” the decision-makers still thought within the prism of socialist ideology.

While simultaneously calling for integration, party theorists also warned against the danger of it. In 1992, Bui Thien Ngo, the then minister of interior, told the *Communist Review*: “Our people welcome investment by foreign capitalists and are ready to create more favourable conditions possible to enable them to invest here. But we cannot allow people to use this to deceive the masses, and we cannot allow anyone to use the open-door policy and economic exchange to destroy our country.”<sup>23</sup> The deputy director of Ho Chi Minh National Academy, the party’s key school, also warned against the challenges of integration for a smaller economy: “Interdependence among countries can be transformed into dependence of one country on another. This case easily happens for poor and small countries in relation to rich countries and large countries.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, Vietnam has embraced international integration to the extent that it brings positive economic opportunities and raises the country’s prestige and position. But in the security and political domains, the CPV remains wary that international integration will require compromises in national independence, sovereignty, self-reliance, and socialist ideology.<sup>25</sup>

Doi Moi managed to encompass irreconcilable goals—a phenomenon of ideological incongruence that political scientist Tuong Vu calls “schizophrenia.”<sup>26</sup> Duality is indeed prevalent in Vietnam’s strategic thinking. “Self-reliance” and “proactive international integration” are not the only such pair of concepts. Other key examples include “consistent in its principle, flexible in tactics” and “cooperation while struggling.”<sup>27</sup> While the former is self-explanatory, the latter is a concept that has replaced the “ai thang ai” antagonism. Cooperation while struggling became a more suitable way to define Vietnam’s complex and contending relationships with both China and the United States. Neither country can be seen singularly as a friend or a foe, but instead they are “partners of cooperation” and “target[s] of struggle/competition,” depending on the context. The two sets of major relationships exemplify that. With China, there is economic and ideological

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<sup>23</sup> “Protecting National Security in the New Situation,” *Communist Review*, September 1992, 3.

<sup>24</sup> “Protecting National Security in the New Situation.”

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Vu, *Vietnam’s Communist Revolution*, 277.

<sup>27</sup> Pham Binh Minh, “Mot so suy nghi ve dinh hinh chinh sach doi ngoai moi” [Thoughts on Shaping New Foreign Policy], in *Dinh huong chien luoc doi ngoai Viet Nam den 2020* [Setting the Direction for Vietnam’s Strategic Diplomacy toward 2020], ed. Pham Binh Minh (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quoc Gia, 2010).

cooperation while struggling over the national interests such as territorial sovereignty. The United States, while still posing an ideological threat, can be helpful in coping with the sovereignty threat in the South China Sea.

Such dualities can be seen as an attempt by the CPV to accommodate the complexity of the changing external environment while preserving the party's core worldview. But such a foreign policy has its limitations as well. Though offering flexibility, such an approach also risks unreliability as it leads to informal and nonbinding arrangements. The aversion to commitment is not new for Vietnam. While the role of ideology has been seemingly minimized since the Doi Moi reforms, the next section will show that elements of the older thinking remain unchanged despite efforts to embrace new concepts of openness.

#### THE "THREE NO'S" POLICY: THE KEY TO SELF-RELIANCE OR SELF-LIMITATION?

For the Vietnamese people, independence is sacred. Generations of Vietnamese schoolchildren learn Ho Chi Minh's famous motto by heart: *Khong co gi quy bau hon doc lam tu do* (Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom). This principle has been incorporated into the core of Vietnam's domestic political narratives. As such, the concept of nonalignment, particularly after earlier failed alliances, was a perfect match to accommodate this sentiment.<sup>28</sup> It is this spirit of independence to which the CPV leaders refer when justifying why one of Vietnam's key defense concepts rests on the avoidance of formal alliances. The three no's principle determines Vietnamese strategic thinking. It stipulates the following:

Vietnam's policy is not to join any military alliance, not to allow any foreign country to establish military bases in Vietnam, and not to take part in any military action that uses force or threatens to use force against another country. However, Vietnam is ready to defend itself against any violation of its territory, air space, waters and national interests; Vietnam is not going to undertake arm races, but constantly strengthens its military capabilities for the purpose of sufficient self-defense.<sup>29</sup>

This policy was adopted after normalization of relations with China and was primarily a form of reassurance that Hanoi has no hostile intentions

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<sup>28</sup> A useful discussion on historical cases of unsuccessful alliances is provided by Panagiotis Dimitrakis, *Failed Alliances of the Cold War: Britain's Strategy and Ambitions in Asia and the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> Ministry of National Defence (Vietnam), *Vietnam National Defence* (Hanoi, 2004), 5.

toward China involving the use of force. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Vietnam needed to make such a major concession to improve relations with China.<sup>30</sup> To date, the policy continues to limit Vietnam's relations with other partners and constrains its strategic options. In domestic reasoning, the three no's refer to the nation's value of independence and evoke the bitter experience of overreliance. For North Vietnam, alliances with the Soviet Union and China were unsuccessful; for South Vietnam, its alliance with the United States did not save it from falling. These experiences, paired with the collapse of the Soviet Union and other Communist states, further contributed to Vietnam's aversion to binding treaty alliances. But this is only a partial explanation. In fact, Vietnam sought an alliance-like relationship, including a military guarantee, with China in 1991 in the wake of normalization but was turned down because Beijing preferred to be "comrades but not allies." This means that, through strategic calculation, Hanoi has been able to overcome the psychological disappointment of unsuccessful past alliances. More importantly, the reassurance of the three no's was supposed to work both ways, with the neighbors vowing no hostile intentions toward each other. However, Beijing's recent coercive behavior in the South China Sea questions the prudence of the three no's principle as a reassurance of good neighborly relations. If Hanoi revises this self-restricting policy to seek opportunities for more formalized defense partnerships, Beijing is bound to react strongly and is likely to threaten harsh consequences. But it is precisely because tensions in the region are already escalating that a stronger contingency plan and more reliable forms of security guarantee are required to secure Vietnam's national interests.

### *The Evolving External Challenges*

Despite a wide and expanding network of bilateral partnerships, including a comprehensive strategic partnership with China, these relationships provide limited assurance. Tensions in the South China Sea have repeatedly challenged the effectiveness of diplomacy, not only in the case of Vietnam but also in the wider international community. Vietnam's re-engagement with the world happened during a period of globalization, general support for trade liberalization, and also relative peace. Yet this preference for integration is

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<sup>30</sup> Vietnam and China developed rules after the normalization, called "four goods and sixteen golden letters." The four goods were: good neighbors, good friends, good partners, and good comrades. The sixteen letters described the nature of the relationship: long-term, stable, future-oriented, and involving comprehensive cooperation. These were agreed on in 1999 between the secretary generals of the two countries, Le Kha Phieu and Jiang Zemin.

now increasingly being replaced by inward-looking tendencies, not only in the Asia-Pacific but around the globe, such as with Brexit in the European Union or the United States' decision to withdraw from transnational commitments such as the TPP.<sup>31</sup>

Few countries are more alert than Vietnam to the challenges related to great-power politics. In the highly demanding context of competing, yet interdependent, relations between great powers, Vietnam aims to achieve a “dynamic equilibrium,”<sup>32</sup> maintaining good but equidistant relationships with all major powers. Particularly in terms of the Sino-U.S. rivalry, there is a conviction in Hanoi that a closer relationship with one side would take a toll on the other: “If we tilt too much toward one big country, we will lose our influence with other powers. For example, if we invested all of our interest in the United States, we could damage our relationship with China, which would adversely affect our strategic interests.”<sup>33</sup> Along with this reasoning, there is also Vietnam's perceived strategic self-importance due to its geographic position and the conviction that the great powers want to win over Vietnam.<sup>34</sup>

But changes in the region's strategic environment allow little room for attaining such perfect balance. In China, President Xi Jinping, calling this a “new era,” has clarified the nation's goal of pursuing “a rightful place” in the world order—one that would dominate the neighboring regions.<sup>35</sup> A tangible indicator of this is Beijing's continued efforts to militarize the features it has built in the South China Sea.<sup>36</sup> There are also a number of other factors that amplify China's assertiveness: weakening regional diplomacy, its contestation of the rules-based order, and the perception that the United States intends to withdraw from global affairs under President Donald Trump. The weak response from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to

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<sup>31</sup> For further discussion, see Stephen M. Walt, “The Collapse of the Liberal World Order,” *Foreign Policy*, June 26, 2016 ~ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/26/the-collapse-of-the-liberal-world-order-european-union-brexit-donald-trump>; and Heather Hurlburt and Elena Souris, “Isolationism in the Trump Era of ‘America First,’” *New America Weekly*, August 24, 2017 ~ <https://www.newamerica.org/weekly/edition-174/isolationism-trump-era-america-first>.

<sup>32</sup> While the term “dynamic equilibrium” is linked to Indonesia's foreign policy narrative, the phrase is also widely used in the Vietnamese debate.

<sup>33</sup> Nguyen Viet Thao, “Safeguarding Sovereignty over Vietnam's Sea and Islands in the New Context,” *Political Theory Quarterly*, no. 2 (2017).

<sup>34</sup> Thao, “Safeguarding Sovereignty over Vietnam's Sea and Islands in the New Context.”

<sup>35</sup> “China Focus: President Xi Vows to Serve the People as National Legislature Concludes Annual Session,” *Xinhua*, March 20, 2018 ~ [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/20/c\\_137053254.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/20/c_137053254.htm).

<sup>36</sup> Rapidly developing installments are tracked by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI). See “Maps of the Asia Pacific,” AMTI, Center for Strategic and International Studies ~ <https://amti.csis.org/maps/>.

China's expansive movements in the South China Sea is not new.<sup>37</sup> However, China's bilateral relations with individual member states, including the Philippines—the only claimant that has taken its maritime disputes to the Permanent Court of Arbitration—affects the regional unity and effectiveness of multilateral diplomacy.<sup>38</sup>

As recent developments show, Hanoi's goodwill in the form of the three no's has not been sufficient to prevent Chinese aggression and intimidation. The disputed waters around the Paracel Islands are where Vietnam is likely to face the strongest coercion from China, given limited external support. It was to the Paracels that Beijing in May 2018 sent an H-6K bomber—whose range could encompass the entire territory of Vietnam and most of the Philippines—generating a strong diplomatic reaction from Hanoi.<sup>39</sup> Such provocative behavior occurred despite the 2016 tribunal ruling denying the legitimacy of China's claimed nine-dash line.<sup>40</sup> Under Xi, China will only continue its assertive trajectory, unafraid to openly defy the international rules-based order even at the expense of international criticism. Whether and how Washington will react remain open questions. To some observers, a significant U.S. response seems doubtful given Trump's "America first" policy.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the Trump administration's use of tariffs against China has arguably created more tension without challenging its geostrategic posture, which while addressing China, may cause collateral damage to other economies, including in Southeast Asia.

Also near the Paracels, in May 2014 the China National Offshore Oil Corporation deployed the HYSY-981 oil rig within the Vietnamese claimed exclusive economic zone. This incident created tension and risked escalation. Although it was eventually resolved peacefully, the standoff has had lasting repercussions for bilateral relations by seriously eroding strategic trust and raising questions about the value and sincerity of party-to-party ties.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Aileen Baviera "The China Challenge to ASEAN's Solidarity: The Case of the South China Sea," *Asian Studies* 38, no. 2 (2002): 93–120.

<sup>38</sup> Huong Le Thu, "China's Dual Strategy of Coercion and Inducement towards ASEAN," *Pacific Review* (2018) ~ <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2017.1417325>.

<sup>39</sup> Khanh Vu, "Vietnam Says China's Bombers in Disputed South China Sea Increase Tensions," Reuters, May 22, 2018.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Leszek Buszynski, "The South China Sea after the Arbitral Tribunal," *Maritime Issues*, June 26, 2017 ~ <http://www.maritimeissues.com/politics/the-south-china-sea-after-the-arbitral-tribunal.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Shear "Trump Declares 'America First' Policy a Success after Asia Trip," *New York Times*, November 15, 2017; and Daniel Twining, "Assessing Trump's Emerging Asia Policy," *Foreign Policy*, December 24, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Huong Le Thu, "Vietnam's Great Power Diplomacy Since the HYSY-981 Oil Rig Crisis," in *Asia-Pacific Security Dossier*, ed. Tim Huxley (London: International Institute for Security Studies, 2016).

More recent cases of Chinese coercion against Vietnam include interference in operations to explore for natural resources in the South China Sea. In July 2017 and again in March 2018, PetroVietnam, working in cooperation with the Spanish company Repsol, reportedly withdrew their gas and oil exploration activities due to intimidation by China.<sup>43</sup> Unlike in the HYSY-981 incident, these cases did not challenge sovereignty claims directly and did not involve military or paramilitary vessels. Also, unlike the previous case, Hanoi did not conduct a media campaign exposing the incident this time. Hence, the incidents did not draw the same level of international attention and diplomatic support. In addition, in May 2018, Beijing ignored Hanoi's diplomatic request to withdraw the defensive missile systems that China had deployed on the Spratly Islands.<sup>44</sup> These examples demonstrate that China will continue to take advantage of Vietnam's lack of contingency plans. Under Xi, China's strategic ambitions not only pose a threat to Vietnam's sovereignty claims; they also create a number of legal, economic, and diplomatic challenges to Vietnamese interests.

### *Expanding Vietnam's Security Cooperation*

Vietnam's responses to China's increasing aggression are in fact consistent with the line of policy developed since Doi Moi. Hanoi so far has opted to pursue a strategy based on the following key pillars: (1) combine "cooperation and struggle" to increase partnerships, (2) limit and reduce opposition and harness and exploit relations among the great powers, (3) avoid the risk of becoming entangled in conflicts and interest disputes among these countries, (4) make policy transparent to avoid misunderstandings with the great powers, (5) develop specific strategies to promote relations with each country, and (6) be consistent in foreign policy lines.<sup>45</sup>

These measures are neither innovative nor adaptive to the new challenges. At the core of this approach is an assumption that while China poses a strategic threat to Vietnam, there is still room for comradeship. Some Vietnamese thinkers recognize that China will continue to promote comprehensive

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<sup>43</sup> Bill Hayton, "The Week Donald Trump Lost the South China Sea," *Foreign Policy*, July 31, 2017 ~ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/07/31/the-week-donald-trump-lost-the-south-china-sea>; and Bill Hayton "China's Intimidation in the South China Sea Poses an Economic Threat to Vietnam," *East Asia Forum*, April 25, 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Amanda Macias, "China Quietly Installed Defensive Missile Systems on Strategic Spratly Islands in Hotly Contested South China Sea," *CNBC*, May 2, 2018; and "Vietnam Demands That China Withdraw Missiles from Spratly Islands," *VN Express*, May 8, 2018 ~ <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnam-demands-that-china-withdraw-missiles-from-spratly-islands-3746906.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Thao, "Safeguarding Sovereignty over Vietnam's Sea and Islands in the New Context."

cooperation with Vietnam, on the one hand, while aggressively pursuing its interests in the South China Sea, on the other.<sup>46</sup> For example, Nguyen Vu Tung, the head of the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam—the country’s main think tank—believes that China’s economic superiority will influence its foreign policy: “China continues to use its economic power to rally forces, thereby limiting other countries’ support to Vietnam on strategic issues, including sea and island affairs. In the long run, China continues to affirm ‘strategic interests.’”<sup>47</sup>

Despite some recognition of growing Chinese assertiveness, the CPV has been persistent in sustaining the existing approach focused on expanding Vietnam’s diplomatic network. The fragile balance between opening up and maintaining core socialist values has been difficult to achieve, and hence there is a great reluctance to disturb it. In 2016, party leaders recognized that the dynamically changing international environment is increasingly unfavorable for Vietnam and poses growing security challenges, but they have not yet made the necessary policy adjustments. Over 30 years after Doi Moi was introduced, the foreign policy priorities for 2016–20 set at the 12th National Congress remain an extension of these reforms.<sup>48</sup>

Vietnam’s successful foreign policy transformation through Doi Moi created the false perception that an expanding diplomatic network can relieve the burden of planning for security contingencies. As a result, Vietnamese diplomats are tasked with an even higher responsibility to work toward maximizing Vietnam’s interests. The 2009 defense white paper stated that “Vietnam consistently realizes the foreign policy guidelines of independence, autonomy, equality and cooperation; seeks to broaden its international relations; and practices omnidirectional diplomacy.”<sup>49</sup>

To the extent possible, Vietnam’s omnidirectional foreign policy has confirmed the country’s reputation as a responsible member of the

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<sup>46</sup> See Nguyen Vu Tung, “Forecasting Relations among Big Countries and Their Impact on Vietnam,” *Communist Review*, May 5, 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> These priorities were (1) ensuring the maximal interests of the nation and people based on international rules and principles, equality, and mutually beneficial relationships, (2) consistently pursuing foreign relations based on independence, self-reliance, peace, cooperation, and development, (3) diversifying partners as well as multidimensional cooperation, and (4) proactively pursuing international integration, becoming a trusted friend and partner, and becoming a responsible stakeholder of the international community. Author’s translation from Vu Manh Tri, “Lam ro them quan diem, duong loi doi ngoai va chu dong hop nhat quoc te cua dang, nha nuoc ta” [Clarifying Our Party’s and State’s Viewpoint, Pathways for Foreign Policy, Proactive International Integration], *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, January 22, 2016.

<sup>49</sup> Ministry of National Defence (Vietnam), *Vietnam National Defence* (Hanoi, 2009), 18 ~ <http://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/files/library/ARF%20Defense%20White%20Papers/Vietnam-2009.pdf>.

international community that respects international law and insists on resolving disputes through peaceful measures. Vietnam has also invested in other forms of balancing, including military modernization. China's threat in the South China Sea has motivated Hanoi to upgrade its naval and air force to develop capabilities to respond to likely contingencies in the maritime domain from the late 1990s. But despite the efforts to modernize its armed forces, Vietnam will face limitations related to budget, interoperability among its forces, and effective integration of technology and systems, such as radar and missiles, acquired from diverse sources.<sup>50</sup> Vietnam's capacity to equip itself will remain modest, particularly in comparison with its potential adversaries.<sup>51</sup> And unlike in the past, guerrilla warfare is no longer a feasible scenario. Given the growing power asymmetry with China, Vietnam's current self-constraints and the inherent resistance to fundamentally reforming its security policy add to its vulnerability.

While, as showcased, deep reforms have yet to be conducted, the expansion of security cooperation has been pursued, notably since the HYSY-981 incident. The shock of the unexpected aggression from China served as a wake-up call for Hanoi and prompted a rare domestic debate on escaping from China's orbit. Voices warning against taking neighbor solidarity and nonaggression for granted gained greater traction. The government, as a result, has needed to quickly rethink its long-term reluctance to engage in deeper security cooperation with key actors in the region, including the United States. Since then, the government has more actively sought deeper relations with Washington.<sup>52</sup> After the HYSY-981 incident, the United States in 2016 announced the full annulment of the arms embargo on Vietnam that had been in place since the war. Over the last year, the U.S.-Vietnam defense relationship has continued to develop. The USS *Carl Vinson* aircraft carrier visited Da Nang in March 2018—the first such visit in four decades—and Vietnam participated in the 2018 Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercises.<sup>53</sup> These highly symbolic events have invited hostile comments from China, with media releases warning Vietnam and the United States not to “cross the

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<sup>50</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, “Force Modernization: Vietnam,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2018): 429–44.

<sup>51</sup> See Derek Grossman, “Can Vietnam's Military Stand Up to China in the South China Sea?” *Asia Policy* 13, no. 1 (2018): 113–34.

<sup>52</sup> Le Thu, “Vietnam's Diplomacy Since HYSY-981.”

<sup>53</sup> Jake Maxwell Watts, “In China's Shadow, Communist Vietnam Links Arms with Old Enemy, the U.S.,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 2, 2018; and Nguyen Quy, “Vietnam Shows Up at World's Largest Naval Exercise,” *VN Express*, June 27, 2018 ~ <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnam-shows-up-at-world-s-largest-naval-exercise-3769573.html>.

red line.”<sup>54</sup> Since the normalization in 1995, Hanoi has been more cautious about elevating the U.S.-Vietnam relationship to security cooperation, citing the need to move at a “comfortable pace.”<sup>55</sup> But its level of comfort has rapidly advanced as China’s maritime assertiveness has become more tangible, accelerating the convergence of strategic interests between Hanoi and Washington.

Such strategic anxiety has pushed Vietnam to also more eagerly advance its relations with a number of other regional partners. The relationship with Russia, for example, continues to be an important anchor for Vietnam’s acquisition of defense capabilities. As a part of their bilateral comprehensive strategic partnership, Russia and Vietnam have committed to cooperation in military technology until 2020, pledged to increase the number of military exchanges, and widened the scope of joint education and training.

Japan has gradually become Vietnam’s most reliable partner. In 2014, the two states elevated their cooperation to the level of an extensive strategic partnership. Their expanding agenda includes training for peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), information technology, military medicine, and cybersecurity. Vietnam has invited the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force to visit Cam Ranh and hold HADR training exercises. Japan, for its part, has identified Vietnam as one of the key priority countries for its regional strategy.<sup>56</sup>

Australia has also been helpful in training Vietnamese peacekeeping forces. In March 2018 the two sides finally signed a strategic partnership, 43 years after Australian troops left Vietnam. The process of becoming strategic partners took considerable time, and without common regional concerns probably would have taken longer.<sup>57</sup>

India is another important long-term partner for Vietnam. In 2016, as a part of the strategic partnership between the two countries and with a growing appetite for security cooperation, India pledged a credit line of

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<sup>54</sup> Li Ruohan, “U.S. and Vietnam Should Not Cross S. China Sea Red Line with Carrier Visit,” *Global Times*, January 29, 2018 ~ <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1087174.shtml>.

<sup>55</sup> For more details on the evolution of U.S.-Vietnam relations since normalization, see Huong Le Thu, “Vietnam and the New U.S.: Developing ‘Like-Minded’ Partners,” in “Vietnam in the Indo-Pacific: Challenges and Opportunities in a New Regional Landscape,” ed. Jeffrey Wilson, Perth USAsia Centre, 2018.

<sup>56</sup> “Joint Statement on Deepening the Japan-Vietnam Extensive Strategic Partnership,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), June 6, 2017 ~ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000262573.pdf>.

<sup>57</sup> Huong Le Thu, “Ripe for Cooperation: The Australia-Vietnam Strategic Partnership,” ASPI, Strategist, March 13, 2018 ~ <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/ripe-cooperation-australia-vietnam-strategic-partnership>.

\$500 million to facilitate defense procurement.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, India promised to help Vietnam develop its naval and coast guard capabilities and conduct joint exercises. In 2017, two Indian naval ships visited Hai Phong, and in May 2018 another three ships paid a five-day port visit to Da Nang.

Vietnam and China likewise continue to engage in cooperation, including a regular strategic dialogue as well as port visits.<sup>59</sup> But such regular contacts and reassurances of nonaggression, as well as an emphasis on ideological solidarity, seem to have little effect in de-escalating China's perceived threat to Vietnam. By the same token, the above-mentioned advancement of security cooperation with key regional actors, while welcome, is insufficient for mitigating Vietnam's vulnerability. It is important to recognize that Hanoi's eagerness to expand such cooperation, like the reforms under the banner of Doi Moi, came as an ad hoc response to a crisis—this time China's aggressive behavior in the South China Sea. Vietnam still needs to formulate a long-term policy that includes a security guarantee element. A good starting point would be complementing the three “no's” policy with one that includes some “yes's”—for example, saying yes to relationships that advance national security and economic interests.

#### CONCLUSION: OVERCOMING RESISTANCE TO PROMOTE CHANGE

This essay has demonstrated that while Vietnam's opening up was key to successfully transforming the economy, elevating the country's position in international diplomacy, and even expanding defense diplomacy, the core of the CPV's thinking remains constrained. Whereas Vietnamese society has embraced internationalization over the past three decades, at the political level the party's priorities have stayed largely the same. Opening up was never intended to invite total integration. Rather, it was meant to maintain a safe level at which Vietnam's economy and diplomacy could develop, without risking overreliance on, interference by, or disruption from external forces. Integration was intended to be shallow and selective.

While striking a balance between integration and self-reliance remains desirable, it has proved limiting for Vietnamese foreign policy, which is

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<sup>58</sup> Ho Binh Minh, “India Offers \$500 Million Defense Credit as Vietnam Seeks Arms Boost,” Reuters, September 3, 2016 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-india/india-offers-500-million-defense-credit-as-vietnam-seeks-arms-boost-idUSKCN11905U>.

<sup>59</sup> “Chinese Ship Visits Hai Phong,” *People's Army Newspaper*, November 11, 2016 ~ <http://en.qdnd.vn/military/intl-relations-and-cooperation/chinese-ship-visits-hai-phong-475234>.

largely defined by the duality of dogmatic commitment to self-reliance and Doi Moi. Self-reliance was adopted after unsuccessful experiences with alliances, but in the late 1980s and 1990s the government also developed the notion of opening up to international integration without compromising socialist thinking. What this essay characterizes as the dilemma between the two key concepts of Vietnamese foreign policy—self-reliance and proactive international integration—was actually a hard-struck balance that legitimized the socialist regime for the past three decades. International integration in the post-Doi Moi era largely meant economic integration. Political and security opening has been more limited, and any questioning of this delicate balance would likely be received skeptically in Hanoi.

However, new external challenges require Vietnam to recalibrate its foreign policy. Without addressing the core of this balance, its defense policies will remain constrained in ways that undermine the country's national interests. Questioning self-reliance in foreign policy does not imply the immediate pursuit of alliances. It is not realistic to expect CPV leaders to turn against the political philosophy that brought them to power, and an alliance with a non-socialist country would mean a major revision of Vietnam's political principles. However, though it is unlikely that Hanoi will soon seek formal alliances, it is essential that it re-examine the ideological basis of its foreign and defense policies. Otherwise, they risk remaining a relic of the Cold War era, a dogma that is neither realistic nor suitable to the challenging power shifts of today.

Under the banner of “strategically consistent, but tactically flexible,” Vietnamese foreign policy thinking leaves room for decisions beyond fixed ideology. That means there should be no insistence on any restrictions that are detrimental to national interests. Instead, Hanoi should develop more policies that give preference to security cooperation in an active and affirmative way, rather than operating on negotiations alone. Bearing this in mind, Vietnamese policymakers should reconsider the equilibrium between self-reliance and proactive integration and allow their policies more flexibility in order to consistently safeguard the national interests of sovereignty, independence, and enhanced resilience to external pressure. They must realize that the current strategic goals have changed, and therefore the strategies to achieve these goals should change too.

The original goal of Doi Moi was to save Vietnam from becoming a failed state. The government now needs to put more emphasis on defending national sovereignty. Updating its foreign and defense policies would not only allow the country to better respond to the current threats from China but also

upgrade its strategic position in regional politics. Such a shift would advance Vietnam's strategic thinking from the 1990s-era goal of merely being able to participate in the international community to the current goal of actively contributing to and shaping regional and international affairs. ◆