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The US-Russia-Vietnam Triangle: Decoding Hanoi's Strategic Balancing

Vietnam has struck a careful balance in its reaction to the Ukraine conflict. But how long can it avoid taking sides?

By Huynh Tam Sang

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, Vietnam has sought to distance itself from the great-power rivalry in Eastern Europe by underscoring that it is "not taking sides" in the conflict. Nevertheless, the controversies surrounding Vietnam's dogged tightrope walk between Washington and Moscow have lingered.

Vietnam, a former ally of the Soviet Union, abstained from the United Nations resolution condemning Russia's war against Ukraine, officially called for restraint from all sides engaged, and voted against suspending Russia from the U.N. Human Rights Council. But then, in May, Vietnam provided \$500,000 in humanitarian aid for "those affected by the conflict in Ukraine." The contribution, albeit relatively modest, demonstrates that Vietnam sympathizes with the Ukrainians, and on top of that, it aims at alleviating Washington's misgivings about Hanoi's dangling posture vis-à-vis the Ukraine war.

Yet, pundits remain skeptical about the fruitfulness of Vietnam striking a subtle balance between the great powers, saying that Vietnam's dubious response to the Ukraine war could undermine the U.S.-Vietnam relationship, which is on the upswing. Eventually, Vietnam may get embroiled in exactly the type of strategic conundrum that it is seeking to avert.

Recent keynote addresses from Vietnam's top leaders offer the key to deciphering Hanoi's stance on the Ukraine issue and its relations with the great powers more broadly. In his address at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies on May 11, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh said, "In a world full of turbulence, strategic competition, and a great many choices, Vietnam picks no side. Instead, it chooses justice, fairness, and goodness, based on the principles of international law and the U.N. Charter." Vietnam's message could be read as an acute assurance about Hanoi's "neutral posture" despite its deep ties to Moscow, dating back to the Soviet Union's moral support, fraternal aid, and military and economic assistance to North Vietnam.

Chinh's remarks also revolved around common principles and widely shared values, with the keywords sincerity, trust, and responsibility appearing more than 60 times in his talk (and again in his response to questions from onsite attendees). From the lens of discourse analysis, Chinh sought to frame Vietnam's foreign policy perception and practice toward cooperation instead of competition, and peace instead of war. Though not explicit, Chinh's message reveals that Vietnam has not leaned toward Russia, especially amid the Russia-U.S. rivalry, let alone thrown its support behind Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine. To Vietnamese leaders, it would be a false analogy to assume that Vietnam's failure to condemn Russia is equal to Hanoi's support of Moscow's invasion of Kyiv.

Nguyen Phu Trong, the general secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party, in his speech at the National Foreign Relations Conference in December 2021, recapped the philosophy of the “Vietnamese bamboo” school of diplomacy, with “strong roots, stout trunk, and flexible branches.” Trong, the Vietnamese strongman who has an immense influence on the country’s foreign policy, also encapsulated the essential features of former President Ho Chi Minh’s astute advice. He touched upon key issues, such as appreciating Vietnam’s strategic position in its relations with neighboring countries and major powers, respecting and helping great powers “preserve dignity,” and “embracing both tough and soft measures” to serve the highest national interests of Vietnam.

The way Vietnamese leaders framed the country’s foreign relations tells us about nuanced interpretations of its outside environment. Though keeping a close eye on security flashpoints, including those in Ukraine and the South China Sea, Vietnam has sought to maximize its geostrategic leverage by actively working to strengthen the resilience of ASEAN through its initiatives and dynamic engagement. Vietnam has also embraced multilateralism as its foreign-policy motto, and has established 30 strategic and comprehensive partnerships with foreign countries. Additionally, Vietnam and the U.S. have worked to enhance mutual trust and understanding, and bolstered ties in the areas of diplomacy, economics, and defense. By nature, the two countries are “strategic partners in all but name.” Chinh’s recent visit to Washington was a landmark success for Vietnam, with many schemes and opportunities announced that will foster closer ties between the two countries.

Meanwhile, Vietnam has a “comprehensive strategic partnership” with Russia, a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council. Though the war in Ukraine remains ongoing, Russia is still a significant factor in the global arena, as well as a major defense partner of Vietnam, which procures more than 80 percent of its military equipment from Moscow. Last December, Vietnam and Russia signed a military-technical deal to expand military trade and technology ties further. As for security in the South China Sea, Vietnam needs Russia as Moscow has a diplomatic role to play in the Russia-Vietnam-China triangle. To Vietnamese leaders, the window of opportunity provided by their country’s longstanding ties with Russia, though small or blurry, remains open.

Moreover, the West is seeking economic decoupling from Russia, but even if a consensus between Russia and Western countries or Putin’s retreat from Ukraine happens, isolating Russia is perhaps not a future that the U.S. and European countries wish to see. For Vietnam, a country that has maintained long-established links to Russia and strategic ties with the U.S., condemning Russia or joining the U.S.-led sanctions against Moscow is not a wise choice.

But the isolation of Russia by the Western bloc and Vietnam’s dependence on Russia’s defense industry have posed challenges for Vietnam’s strategy of staying neutral in the Ukraine conflict. First, Vietnam needs diplomatic support and political aid from Russia, whose permanent seat and veto on the U.N. Security Council are still essential to Hanoi. Nevertheless, the deteriorating status of Russia could hardly benefit Vietnam as growing ties between Moscow and Hanoi are nerve-racking and could be viewed as a sort of (informal) alliance. Second, although Vietnam has sought to diversify its arms purchases, it remains unlikely that Vietnam will be willing to switch to other partners for offensive weaponry, including the U.S., in the short term. The reasonable prices of Russian military equipment and convenient payment options have made Moscow an ideal arms partner.

Closer Sino-Russian relations also deserve attention. If Russia becomes more dependent on China for economic, technological, and military assistance, which seems likely as Moscow's economy is hammered by the barrage of new sanctions, Beijing may discourage Moscow from providing offensive weaponry to Hanoi. Consequently, Russia would be loath to phase out or reduce arms sales to Vietnam, which would be a win for the Southeast Asian country. Additionally, Russia's defense industrial troubles, especially following its shocking and poor performance on the Ukrainian battlefield, could put Vietnam into a fragile position.

In the event of China's growing intimidation in the South China Sea and/or Russia's reduction of weaponry to Vietnam, Vietnam may eventually edge closer to the U.S. for defense equipment. An issue that should be noted is that the U.S. could use the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) as a strategic card to persuade Hanoi to reduce its arms dependence on Russia and turn to Washington for defense orders. Should this move take place, it could likely weaken Hanoi's ties with Moscow and put Vietnam in a problematic situation when coming to its relations with China, or at least place a strain on Vietnam's goal of maintaining a strategic equilibrium between great powers.

For years to come, Vietnam will likely continue to walk a tightrope between the U.S. and Russia, and at the same time pursue a multipolar balance in its foreign relations. And it seems to be far-fetched to anticipate a radical shift in Vietnam's relations with Russia, given Hanoi's tradition of taking a prudent posture on contentious issues or great-power conflicts. Yet, in times of turbulence, Vietnam's commitment towards not picking sides in great power rivalry will continue to be put to the test. All things considered, the success of Vietnam's strategic balancing between the U.S. and Russia remains to be seen.

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