

STRATEGIC THINKING:

THEORY, PRACTICE AND THE CASE OF VIETNAM

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Abstract

National policies and decisions all aim at achieving long-term and desired outcomes. From a perspective, success largely depends on strategic choices. In turn, policy planning and implementation partly rely on leaders' mindset and approaches, and those of advisors and staff. This paper attempts to analyze key theoretical and practical aspects of "strategic thinking", which serves as an important nexus between policy planning and implementation; based on the research findings, the author proposes a few of policy recommendations for Vietnam in the coming time.

Key words: strategic thinking, policy making, Vietnamese diplomacy, "soft border", first line of defense, "asymmetric" strategy, middle power.

International or national policies/decisions are often expected to reach "strategic thinking" level. If a policy is to tackle only short-term problems yet causes long-term adverse consequences, it would result in a "strategic mistake". Conversely, if primary goals are met, that policy would be strategically meaningful and successful.¹

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¹ See, for example, Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Khả năng cải thiện nghịch cảnh [The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable]*, translated by Tran Thi Kim Chi (Hanoi: Youth Publishing House, 2015).

Conceptualizing strategic thinking

Thinking is "the process of reflecting objective realities",² "a higher phase of cognitive process, capturing the essence and discovering the laws of thing in form of symbol, concept, judgement, and thought".³ "Strategy" is a plan of action and/or science/art, composed of creative and smart strategies to achieve overarching, comprehensive, long-term outcomes in political, economic and military fields.⁴ The concept of strategy is often applied to medium to long term. Although there exist different ways of understanding, *strategic thinking* can be essentially defined as a process of approaching subject matters in a broad, logical, rational, multi-level, creative manner with a view to accomplishing major outcomes and producing significant and lasting impact.

Questions make up the main language of strategy.⁵ The more difficult a question is, the better the chance it has to express strategic thinking. For example, what Vietnam should do to avoid being compromised behind the scene by major countries is a strategic question. In this connection, a question of moderate importance is how Vietnam can design a diplomatic agenda in the coming years to apply new "balanced" thinking in its relations with major powers. Another difficult question (but only to specify the first question) is which areas of cooperation, Vietnam should prioritize in dealing with the United States

² Nguyen Manh Cuong, "Về bản chất của tư duy" [The nature of thinking], *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol 1 (152), 2005.

³ "Tư duy" [Thinking], *Glossary*, http://tratu.soha.vn/dict/vn_vn/Tur_duy, retrieved 11/12/2017.

⁴ "Strategy", *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/strategy>, retrieved 11/12/2017; "Strategy", *Oxford Dictionaries*, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/strategy>, retrieved 11/12/2017.

⁵ Nina Bowman, "Four Ways to Improve your Strategic Thinking Skills", *Harvard Business Review*, <https://hbr.org/2016/12/4-ways-to-improve-your-strategic-thinking-skills>, 2016, retrieved 1/11/2017.

and China, with a view to neutralizing the possibility of being compromised.⁶

Strategic thinking helps us see "the big picture" and avoid being consumed by details. In other words, strategic thinking is the process of observing, explaining, and capturing key trends, laying out *a vision* that encompasses fundamental aspects of *strategic spheres* in which one should *take steps* and *mobilize forces* to achieve primary, long-term goals. The "case-by-case" approach is the anti-thesis of strategic thinking. For example, former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski advised US foreign policy planners to focus on the "grand chess board", concentrating resources on key geopolitical areas and missions.⁷ Concurring with several other thinkers, Brzezinski believed that after the Cold War, the United States somehow lost its direction and fell short of a "Grand Strategy" for the new era. American policy towards international issues at that time was dominated by events without a coherent message. The United States was dragged into Iraq, and then Afghanistan, and Pakistan, coupled with fighting terrorism and coping with the rise of China at a time when its relative power gradually declined.

Strategic thinking is linked to geospatial vision.⁸ Historian Frederick L. Schuman calls it "geo-strategic" thinking.⁹ Geography plays a key role in the security and development of nation states, the difference is just

⁶ For example, China is now proposing the Belt and Road Initiative, while the US is spearheading the Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1997).

⁸ The concept of "geospatial space" actually depends on political decisions, for example, without an incident Sri Lanka would have become a member of ASEAN; different specialized organizations also introduce different definitions of the Asia-Pacific region.

⁹ Fredrick Schuman first used the term "geo-strategic" in 1942 in his article "Let Us Learn Our Geopolitics", *Current History*, Vol. 2, (1942): 161-165.

which dimension is prioritized among land, sea, sky and/or space.¹⁰ Modern concepts such as cyberspace, "soft border", "off-shore defense," and "deep defense" are also becoming increasingly popular. Historian Halford Mackinder pointed to the land, while Alfred Mahan promoted sea power. Not putting the Eurasian continent at the epicenter, Mahan noted that the "geopolitical fate" of humankind depends on the Indian and Pacific oceans. Mahan advised countries to build up sea powers of which navy should be to the fore. In a similar thought, American political scientist Nicholas Spykman argued that geography represents a decisive factor for the American power in the sense that the country is first and foremost surrounded and protected by both the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean.¹¹

According to Robert Kaplan, a geo-strategist, Indian and Chinese policy makers have studied Mahan's theory seriously.¹² Switching from the traditional focus on land, China is now building up its maritime power as could be seen in its recent muscle flexing in the East China Sea and the East Sea. Lying on crucial maritime routes to both the Middle East and China, while having complex relations with Pakistan, Afghanistan in the north, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh in the northeast, India has, in the course of history, attached greater importance to strengthening maritime capacity, and in fact, possessed naval forces with considerable deterrent power. Recently, academics and policymakers have touted the role of Indo-Pacific geo-spatial connectivity. At the 2017 APEC summit in Da Nang, the United States President Donald Trump officially announced this concept. Earlier, the India-US Strategic

¹⁰ See, for example, Robert Kaplan, *The revenge of geography - What the map tells us about coming conflicts and the battle against fate*, (New York: Random House, 2012).

¹¹ Nicholas J. Spykman, "Geography and Foreign Policy I", *The American Political Science Review*, Los Angeles (1938).

¹² Robert Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography - What the Map tells us about coming conflicts and the battle against Fate*, (New York: Random House, 2012): 110.

Dialogue in 2013 launched the Indo-Pacific Ocean Economic Corridor initiative. In 2017, scholars K. Y Home R and Rajeev Chartuvedy co-edited a paper titled "*Emerging trans-regional corridors: South and Southeast Asia*", arguing that connecting the regional seas and oceans is indispensable for Asia's next stage of development.¹³ From another point of view, *The Diplomat* editor-in-chief Shannon Tiezzi assumes the Indo-Pacific strategy would form a counterweight to the "Belt and Road" initiative by China.¹⁴

Along with the maritime domain, cyberspace is becoming increasingly consequential. Many countries have recently added this content to their respective national security strategies. For example, China has set the goal to become a "cyberspace superpower."¹⁵ In a 2012 study, De Montfort University of Britain forecasted that cyberspace was going to be even more important than physical spaces¹⁶ while *the Economist* calls it "the fifth domain", along with land, sea, sky and space.¹⁷ In the economic sense, the emergence and spread of crypto

¹³ K. Y Home R and Rajeev Chartuvedy (Eds), *Emerging Trans-regional Corridors: South and Southeast Asia*, Observer Research Foundation, <http://cf.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/GP-ORF-Transregional-Corridors.pdf>, retrieved 25/10/2017.

¹⁴ Shannon Tiezzi, "In Japan, Trump and Abe Offer Alternative to China's 'Belt and Road'", *The Diplomat*, 8/11/2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/in-japan-trump-and-abe-offer-alternative-to-chinas-belt-and-road/>, retrieved 25/11/2017.

¹⁵ Paul Triolo and Graham Webster, China's strategic thinking on building power in cyberspace, a top Party journal's timely explanation translated, *New America*, 25/9/2017, <https://www.newamerica.org/cybersecurity-initiative/blog/chinas-strategic-thinking-building-power-cyberspace/>, retrieved 30/10/2017.

¹⁶ See, for example, *Cyberspace is More Important Than Land, Air or Sea*, <http://www.dmu.ac.uk/research/research-news/2012/december/cyberspace-more-important-than-land,-sea-or-air-%E2%80%93-warns-dmu.aspx>, retrieved 30/10/2017.

¹⁷ "War in the Fifth Domain" (2010), *The Economist*, 21/7/2010, <http://www.economist.com/node/16478792>, retrieved 31/10/2017.

currency such as Bitcoin, Ethereum and Zcash have challenged traditional thinking about fiscal, monetary and banking management.¹⁸

Strategic space is measured not only at width but also in depth, such as deep investment or deep defense. Another related concept is "soft border", which means borders of a country can extend to wherever its ideology, culture, and materials (e.g. goods, services) are present. On the one hand, the process of integration may undermine national sovereignty. On the other, it expands operational space. For example, individually, Southeast Asian countries are mostly modest economies; yet the ASEAN Economic Community as a whole is forecast to be the fifth largest economy in the world by 2020.¹⁹

Unlike abstract thinking, strategic thinking is aligned with actions with practical application as the main purpose in mind. This process thus requires specific skills. According to the renowned economic strategist Glenn Ebersole, "strategic thinking is a very valuable and effective tool", and requires the following 11 skills:²⁰

- The ability to use the left (logical) and right (creative) sides of their brain

- Thinking with a strategic purpose as well as creating a visioning process

¹⁸ See, for example, "The 8 biggest Bitcoin Players Who Could Make a Fortune off the Cryptocurrency", *Time*, 30/10/2017.

¹⁹ World Economic Forum, *The ASEAN Economic Community: What You Need to Know*, 31/5/2016, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/05/asean-economic-community-what-you-need-to-know/>, 2016, retrieved 1/11/2017.

²⁰ Glenn Ebersole, "Strategic Thinking: 11 Critical Skills Needed", *The Path to Strategic Success*, Center for Simplified Strategic Planning, <http://www.cssp.com/CD0808b/CriticalStrategicThinkingSkills>, 2017, retrieved 1/11/2017.

- The ability to clearly define their objectives and develop a strategic action plan with each objective broken down into tasks and each task having a list of needed resources and a specific timeline
- The ability to design flexibility into their plans by creating some benchmarks in their thinking to review progress
- Great strategic thinkers will listen, hear and understand what is said and will read and observe whatever they can so that they will have very helpful and strategic information to guide them
- Committed lifelong learners and learn from each of their experiences
- Strategic thinkers take time out for themselves; their time out may be in the form of a retreat, a special environment
- Seek advice from others
- Strategic thinkers refer to themselves as realistic optimists
- The ability to be non-judgmental; test the ideas after the "brainstorming" is concluded
- The ability to be patient; Great ideas and thoughts require time to develop.

Likewise, expert Peter Walsh of the Harvard Business and Administration defines policy-makers with strategic thinking are those who look to the future, keep learning, have long-term visions, take risks with new methodologies, understand priorities, and make flexible and creative moves.²¹ In terms of skills, various works since ancient times have proven worth reading such as Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* which

²¹ Peter Walsh, "Are You a Strategic Thinker? Test yourself", *Harvard Business*, 20/5/2014, <http://www.harvardbusiness.org/blog/are-you-strategic-thinker-test-yourself>, 2014, retrieved 11/12/2017.

contains valuable points of reference such as strategic linkage, terrain control, decoy and real strike, knowing oneself, and winning without fighting.

In short, to achieve "strategic thinking," planners need: (i) the ability to identify and understand "the big picture", including key features and longstanding trends in the imagined "geographic" space, which should be wide and deep enough; (ii) possess at least the aforementioned skills. The following section will examine the use of strategic thinking by a number of small countries in formulating diplomatic, security and development strategy.

Strategic thinking in practice

Singapore: "Small" but confident in its relations with major powers

What makes Singapore special is that its policy-makers often think outside the box, which means thinking strategically against the coherent unfavorable realities of the country: small in area, poor in resources, modest in population, and communities and ethnic groups not sharing the same history as other nations. Tapping into the pool of knowledge generated by its excellent advisors, subsequent Singaporean governments has set clear, consistent national objectives that honor principles and in the meantime are practical (and pragmatic) with respect to its diplomatic relations with big countries.

In early July 2017, a remarkable debate took place in the country. One camp was represented by Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan (former Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Singapore ASEANSOM leader) and Minister of Justice K Shanmugam (formerly Foreign Minister). The other camp had Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy Mahbubani Kishore and Ambassador Mr. Ong Keng Ong (former Secretary General of ASEAN). They are all Singaporean diplomats,

politicians, and thinkers offering their opinions on how Singapore should behave in the international arena in the "post-Lee Kuan Yew" era.

Kishore kicked off the debate in the *Straits Times*, suggesting that Singapore should follow the governing principles of geopolitics, that is, "small states must always behave like small states"; Singapore is no longer in the position as it was in the time of Lee Kuan Yew, and thus, needs to change the behavior in its dealing with big countries (see the "optimistic but realistic" characteristics of strategic thinking proposed by Glenn Ebersole). Bilahari dismissed this line of thinking, dubbing it a "dangerous mistake", arguing that it will place Singapore in a situation where it will be dominated by big nations.²² Shanmugam supported Bilahari's view, adding that when the country has to be "flexible", it must always be "flexible". The Kishore supporters maintain that adopting geopolitically-driven principles is not the same as Singapore changing its position and foreign policy; it is just a warning that from now on Singapore needs to be more cautious with what it might choose from the policy menu, and it should not show too much ambition in "the Machiavellian world";²³ but this does not necessarily mean that Singapore has to always "kowtow" big countries.²⁴

This debate shows that Singapore, as a successful island state, the only developed country in ASEAN, is always looking for new strategic contours (constantly exploring new directions and having an exit strategy is the quality and skill expected of strategists). In fact, until now,

²² "Roles of Small States: Bilahari's Criticism of Kishore 'Wrong and Misleading'", *Public House*, <https://publichouse.sg/role-small-states-bilaharis-criticism-kishore-wrong-misleading>, 2017, retrieved 19/8/2017.

²³ Nicolo Machiavellia (1469-1527), Italian thinker, who is considered to be a founding father of realism in international relations, warns that countries tend to achieve their goals by all means; that political power and pragmatism play a critical role. Nicolo Machiavellia, *The Prince*, (Dante: University of America Press, 2003).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

although the region and the world have undergone various turmoil, Singapore is still able to maintain healthy relationships with all major countries, thus ensuring its security and status goals.

In the economic term, from the 1960s to the 1970s, Singapore took advantage of its location alongside strategic coastal chokepoints to promote a boom in international trade and transportation, allowing capital flows, new technologies and effective management tools to spread to the island. Propelled by dynamism and creativity, the vision of Singapore also includes elements like maximizing its vantage point in the Strait of Malacca, where 40% of the world goods passes by (strategic thinking about enlarging operational space); prioritizing trade and international investment to amplify interests intertwined with external partners and to promote domestic growth; building up a lean and effective government (strategic thinking about smart steps and effective organization).²⁵ Other solid foundations are meritocracy, honesty and pragmatism.²⁶

Israel: Off-shore defense in response to security challenges

Neo-realists John Measheirmer and Stephen Walt argue that after the end of the Cold War, despite the significance and the special tie lobbied by the American Jewish community, Israel is still regarded as a "strategic liability" to the United States, first and foremost due to the complex relationship of the Jewish state with many neighboring Muslim countries.²⁷ From being a close ally, the United States who began

²⁵ "Why Singapore Became an Economic Success", *The Economist*, 26/3/2015, <https://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2015/03/economist-explains-23>, 2015, retrieved 25/7/2017.

²⁶ Kishore Mahbubani, "Why Singapore is the World's Most Successful Society", *Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kishore-mahbubani/singapore-world-successful-society_b_7934988.html, 2015, retrieved 25/7/2017.

²⁷ John Measheirmer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008): 15.

showing signs of loosening the alliance now put Israel in a unexpected security situation.

In order to reverse the course, Israel applied strategic thinking in a way that put diplomacy one step ahead of other measures, creating an "off-shore defense" strategy. Through the pro-active lobbying role by the American Jewish Committee (AJC) as well as the wider American Jewish community, only after a short period of time, Israel was able to remove the United States thinking that the former was a "burden" or a strategic liability for the latter. In contrast, by 2016, the United States total aid to Israel exceeded US\$150 billion, mostly non-refundable. The lobbying process focused not only on key policy-making agencies such as the Congress, the Administration, but also on the American public audience. Israel persuaded Americans that if the United States cooperated, the gains would be greater than diverting Israel, for instance, in solving the Middle East problems. Thanks to the "lobbying" investments, American public opinion become more favored of Israel through the role of media influencers such as Martin Peretz, Mortimer Zuckerman, William Safire, A.M. Rosenthal and David Brooks. American well-known academics such as Jim Hoagland, Robert Kagan, Charles Krauthammer, Max Boot and George Will regularly produce pro-Israel posts. Numerous newspapers side with Israel like *Commentary*, *New Republic* and *Weekly Standard*. A pro-Israel solution has always received support from both Democrats and Republicans.

Operating regularly on multiple channels and levels of communication (strategic thinking in problem-solving), the AJC and the Israeli government repeatedly hired companies, media outlets, advisory groups and influencers to work on their behalf. Not only in the United States, Israeli diplomatic missions in other countries are also particularly active in connecting and commiserating with the host country. Together with the United State security umbrella, Israel is said to develop high

technology defense capabilities and significant deterrence powers from within.

Instead of waiting for the judgment day and not knowing what the outcome might be due a larger partner's fluctuating behavior at a critical juncture, Israel opted for a forward-thinking approach (appropriate visions and steps), combining indigenous deterrence capabilities with "off-shore defense" (strategic thinking about expansion of defense space). From the skill perspective, as advised by Glenn Ebersole, Israel is successful because it always sets clear goals to be realized by specific plans of actions and adequately allocated resources.²⁸ Lobbying agencies, groups, and individuals that influence the United States policy helped Israel create an extra layer shielding its security and foreign policy interests.²⁹

Poland: Success comes from agility and steps in the right direction

Diplomatically, Poland has always had a seat at the table once there is an international situation that it thinks the country can get involved. For example, Poland was one of the three member countries of the International Commission for Supervision and Control in Viet Nam (ICC), established under the 1954 Geneva Accords and the 1973 Paris Peace Accords. Being agile to shifting situations and having foresight, Polish diplomacy has enabled this country to play a considerable role in the European and world affairs; particularly, Poland is one of the founding members of the United Nations and is now a member of all major international and regional organizations and institutions such as

²⁸ This is to assess only a few aspects of the Israeli diplomacy success from the perspective of Israel. That the United States increased relations with Israel also incited anti-Americanism in many Arab countries and complicating relations between Israel and these countries. John Measheirmer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008): 333.

²⁹ There is no discussion of "right or wrong" here but rather the aspect of effectiveness of Israel's strategy.

the WTO, the EU, NATO, OECD, and OSCE.³⁰ Looking at “the big picture”, taking Europe, even the world as the strategically operational space, Poland forges close and dynamic economic and security partnership with many countries, organizations and regions to obtain pivotal positions, while at the same time managing the sensitive relationships with two giant neighbors Russia and Germany, not letting these two countries pose direct security challenges.³¹

Economically, by 2016, Poland's GDP per capita denominated in purchasing power parity reached US\$25,000, in the top of 65% of high-income countries in Europe. For the past 20 years, Poland's growth has always been the highest in absolute and relative terms compared to other European countries. Poland was the only European country recording positive growth during the 2008-2009 global economic recession. Take a look at its conditions: an energy net import country with limited natural resources and a low starting point. Explaining this phenomenon, several studies suggest that Poland has pushed forward its development course via a deep integration scheme in Europe; making education reform a top priority (now the level has exceeded the European median standard); creating a business environment conducive for domestic and foreign enterprises (according to the World Bank, Poland ranks first on this criterion in the OECD and EU); reforming markets along with strict scrutiny of essential sectors such as banking and public debt.³²

³⁰ Magdalena Rosińska-Bukowska, Józef Bukowski, *Poland in International Organizations*, http://www.instytutgm.uni.lodz.pl/wgrane_pliki/poland-in-international-organizations-maszynopis-wesja-do-publicacji.pdf, 2010, retrieved 25/8/2017.

³¹ Germany supported Poland to join NATO and the EU; The relations between Poland and Russia have some tensions, but the framework is kept for many reasons, including economic cooperation.

³² Marcin Piatkowski, “How Poland became Europe’s Growth Champion: Insight from Post-socialist Transition”, *Brookings*, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2015/02/11/how-poland-became-europes-growth-champion-insights-from-the-successful-post-socialist-transition/>, 2015, retrieved 25/8/2017.

Poland's diplomatic and economic success stems from big thinking, effective use of strategic spaces, and consistent application of golden principles in management. Ample evidence of the success recipe based on high quality human resources and pockets of excellence is that Poland has so far had 15 Nobel Prize winners in different fields.

In sum, from a strategic thinking perspective, the common denominators of success strategies by Singapore, Israel and Poland are as follows:

- Being able to identify strategic spaces both at width and in depth.
- Creating enduring cooperative values in diplomacy and economics with partners; implementing "asymmetrical" strategy; despite being small in scale, a country is still able to produce enough self-defense capabilities by a long-term vision and efficient organization of forces.
- Being flexible, and adaptive to changing circumstances.

Issues for Vietnam

Since the adoption of renovative thinking in 1986, Vietnam has achieved a number of historic successes in terms of socio-economics, security, national defense and diplomacy, promoting national interests and earning worldwide appraisal.³³ Economically, according to the World Bank, since 1990, Vietnam has been among the fastest growing economies in GDP per capita, recording an average of 6.4% per year in the 2000s. [...] Growth has been equally distributed, poverty sharply declined, and social welfare significantly improved. [...] Over the past two decades, more than 40 million Vietnamese have been lifted out of

³³ In this section, the article does not intend to list all the achievements and challenges, rather cite sufficient supporting evidences.

poverty. Yet Vietnam also faces many difficulties and challenges. Currently, Vietnam remains in the low middle income country group while one study shows that since 1960, just 16 out of 100 countries have been able to escape the middle income trap.³⁴ Vietnam's GDP per capita in 2014 reached US\$ 2,052 USD, twenty one times that of 1990, but just equal to Malaysia in 1998, Thailand in 1993, Indonesia in 2008, the Philippines in 2010; Vietnam is 30-35 years behind South Korea, 25 years behind Thailand, 5-7 years behind Indonesia and the Philippines.³⁵

With regard to external relations, together with safeguarding a peaceful, stable environment, Vietnam diplomacy continues to expand and deepen, making practical contributions to national security, development, and image-building. In recent history, Vietnam has also been particularly successful in applying strategic thinking which can be inherited and learned for the next stage of development:

- (i) The peace negotiating process leading to the end of the war;
- (ii) The lifting of blockade and embargo;
- (iii) The innovation, opening up, international integration process (on-going).³⁶

³⁴ "The Middle-income Trap has Little Evidence Going for It", *The Economist*, 7/10/2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21729862-countries-are-neither-rich-nor-poor-can-hold-their-own-against-rivals-both>, 2017, retrieved 9/10/2017. However, the article by the Economist volume also proved the challenges facing middle-income countries are no more than those of the poor or rich ones.

³⁵ "Việt Nam đi sau Thái Lan 20 năm, Hàn Quốc 35 năm" [Vietnam is 20 years behind Thailand and 35 years behind South Korea], *VietnamNet*, 28/8/2015, <http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/kinh-doanh/viet-nam-di-sau-thai-lan-20-nam-han-quoc-35-nam-259068.html>, 2015, retrieved 9/10/2017.

³⁶ See, for example, Pham Binh Minh, "Thành tựu đối ngoại Việt Nam 5 năm qua" [Vietnam's achievements in foreign affairs over the last 5 years], *World and Vietnam*, 1/1/2016. Pham Binh Minh, *Đường lối chính sách đối ngoại Việt Nam trong giai đoạn mới* [Vietnam's Foreign Policy in the New Period], Chính trị quốc gia Publishing House, Hanoi, 2011; Nguyen Vu Tung (ed), *Chính sách đối ngoại Việt Nam 1975-2006*

Success is coupled with challenges. The international environment always undergoes fast, complex and unpredictable changes, such as the current protectionist trend, anti-globalization, and unexpected policy decisions.³⁷ The expansive phase of relationship has basically completed but the deepening one will be more difficult due to a higher demand of intertwined interests, values, and policy coordination between partners. The lesson of maintaining independence and self-reliance in decision-making process, keeping the balance, avoiding "leaning on one side" needs to be kept in mind due to the complex nature, roles and ties among the major powers. The world has supporters of idealism and justice, but there are also ultra-pragmatic forces pursuing hegemony and narrow national interests. The diplomatic enterprise is getting increasingly sophisticated due to the interdependent and omni-dimensional linkages between actors, and the spread of cross-border issues. It is because of that awareness, at the 29th Diplomatic Conference held in August 2016, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc emphasized the need to launch a new strategic thinking for the new era.

In terms of security and national defense, a general assessment at this stage is, "resolutely, persistently struggling to firmly defend independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the Fatherland, maintain peace and stability for the development of the country";³⁸ evolving from "military thinking" to "defense thinking",

[Vietnam's Foreign Policy 1975-2006], Institute of International Relations (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishing House, 2007).

³⁷ Some researchers call these situations "Black Swan" which implies that abnormal incidents rarely occur, but when they do, the impact would be enormous. See, for example, in Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, (New York: Random House, 2007).

³⁸ "Political Report of the 11th Central Committee of the CPV at the 12th National Congress", *Văn kiện Đại hội 12 Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam* [Documents of the 12th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam], (Hanoi: Chính trị quốc gia Publishing House, 2016).

from identifying "friends" and "enemies" to dialectical thinking on "partners" and "opponents"; building the people's army in the direction of "being revolutionary, formal, elite, and of gradual modernization"; solidifying the entire people's defense in line with the people's security, combining economics with national defense and security, and national defense with economics and foreign relations, etc...³⁹ Bilateral defense cooperation is promoted along with pro-active participation in multilateral defense and security mechanisms such as ADMM, ADMM+, ARF, the Shangri La Dialogue, engagement in peacekeeping operations, non-traditional security exercises and other activities.⁴⁰ The basic test to defense and security in the new context is the country has to simultaneously cope with diverse, traditional and non-traditional challenges with limited resources. National security become comprehensive and complicated, requiring faster, more systematic and efficient responses.

For strategic space, Vietnam essentially has mountains, deltas, and seas, of which the marine sphere contributes more than 50% of the country's GDP, and in the future this proportion will increase as the "Blue Economy" is further promoted. One third of global trade passes through the East Sea (a bestowed location similar to the proximity of Singapore to the Strait of Malacca). Vietnam is among the top ten

³⁹ "Thành tựu và kinh nghiệm sau 30 năm đổi mới quân sự, quốc phòng" [Achievements and Experience after 30 Years of Military and Defense Renovation], *People's Army*, 16/12/2016, <http://www.qdnd.vn/quoc-phong-an-ninh/xay-dung-quan-doi/thanh-tuu-va-kinh-nghiem-sau-30-nam-doi-moi-quan-su-quoc-phong-495153>, 2016, retrieved 27/10/2017.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Nguyen Chi Vinh, "Đối ngoại quốc phòng - Thành tựu và những vấn đề đặt ra trong thời kỳ hội nhập và phát triển" [Defense International Relations - Achievements and Issues in the Period of Integration and Development], *Vietnam Border Guard*, 14/5/2017, <http://bienphongvietnam.vn/cong-tac-bien-phong/doi-ngoai-bien-phong/1501-dd.html>, 2017, retrieved 27/10/2017.

countries in terms of coastline length compared to territory.⁴¹ Vietnamese waters provide significant revenues generated from oil and gas, natural resources, transportation, shipbuilding, ports, warehouses, logistics, seafood, tourism, technology and many future sectors such as marine ecosystem conservation, deep sea technology, and alternative energies.

Besides the advantages, the maritime domain also poses challenges. The natural long and narrow territory makes it more difficult to build strategic depth and the country more vulnerable to attacks from the seaside; the impact of climate change and sea level rise is more worrisome than many other countries. The situation in the East Sea is complex in many aspects, especially regarding the dispute over sovereignty and territory, and its association with peace, stability in the region, security, safety, freedom of navigation and overflight, the interpretation and application of international law as well as the environment and marine resources.

No need to cite Mahan's theory, the Vietnamese have long recognized the significance of the *survival space* of the East Sea. Since the launch of Doi Moi in 1986 and even earlier, the activities of asserting sovereignty, sovereign rights, law enforcement, and economic activities of Vietnam have been intensifying.⁴² In economic terms, the *Vietnam*

⁴¹ General Statistics Office 2012.

⁴² For example, continuously and consistently affirming that Hoang Sa, Truong Sa belong to Vietnam; The Politburo issued a resolution on the marine economy (1992); Signed the Agreement on Cooperation in the Continental Shelf with Malaysia (1992); Signed the Agreement on demarcation of the exclusive economic zone and the continental shelf with Thailand (1997); Signed the Agreement on delimitation of territorial waters, exclusive economic zones and continental shelf in the Gulf of Tonkin with China; National Assembly approved the National Boundary Law (2003); Signed the Continental Shelf Agreement with Indonesia (2003); 4th Plenum of the 10th Central Committee approved the Maritime Strategy to 2020 (2007); Vietnam's permanent mission to the United Nations has coordinated with the Malaysian counterpart to submit

Maritime Strategy to 2020 states that "our country must become a strong maritime country, be enriched by unleashing all potentials from the sea, comprehensively develop advanced and diverse marine industries, achieving fast, sustainable, highly efficient growth by a long-term vision"; by 2020, striving for the goal of the marine economy making up about 53%-55% of the country's GDP and 55%-60% of total export revenue.⁴³ Vietnam also regularly states its views, and is willing to cooperate and struggle within bilateral frameworks and at multilateral forums, promote settlement of disputes by peaceful means on the basis of international law, especially the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea 1982, fully implement the DOC, and negotiate an effective COC.

From the challenge side, the policy problem thus lies not in perception but implementation.⁴⁴ Economically, Vietnam's maritime exploitation capacity is only one seventh of South Korea, one twenty of China, and one ninety four of Japan.⁴⁵ At the same time, emphasis is still more on exploitation than development of resources; "service value" and "space value" have not been properly paid attention to;⁴⁶ a "Vietnamese

a joint report on continental outer shelf beyond 200 nautical miles of Vietnam - Malaysia; The Vietnamese mission also submitted its own report to the UN regarding the northern area (2009); Signed with China the Agreement on basic principles governing issues at sea, of which dispute settlement in the South China Sea must be conducted on the basis of international law, including UNCLOS 1982 (2011); National Assembly adopted the Law of the Sea of Vietnam (2012), Vietnam showed prudent and resolute response when China pulled the oil rig HYSY 981 into the Vietnamese waters (2014), ...

⁴³ Resolution on Vietnam's Maritime Strategy to 2020 (Resolution No. 09-NQ/TW on 9/2/2007).

⁴⁴ Having a consistent approach and policy is not easy and not every country can make this happen. For example, while China has a reputation of a "century game" player, many other countries are driven by short term thinking.

⁴⁵ Nguyen Chu Hoi, "Đẩy mạnh phát triển kinh tế biển gắn với bảo đảm chủ quyền vùng biển quốc gia" [Promotion of Marine Economy Development in Association with Safeguarding National Sovereignty], *Border Guard Newspaper*, Vol. 51 (3/2011).

maritime brand" has not been introduced.¹ The East Sea issue generates more questions than answers. Rallying support and winning public option are still challenging even when the country's claims are legitimate.

In cyberspace, according to the International Telecommunication Union and UNICEF, Vietnam is among the countries with the fastest growth in mobile phone and Internet, with an average of 143 mobile phones per 100 people.⁴⁸ About 36 million subscribe to social networks.⁴⁹ However, according to *Microsoft Asia*, Vietnam is also among countries that are the most vulnerable to cyber threats, and in fact has been hit by multiple cyberattacks.⁵⁰ Vietnam's information infrastructure is not uniformed and sufficient to serve an information-based economy.

On "soft border" and "integration space", Vietnam has made great efforts to explore and benefit if one looks at the openness of the economy.⁵¹ Trade is 1.7 times larger than the GDP. Unfortunately, this growth is mainly quantitative while "quality remains low".⁵² In addition,

⁴⁶ Nguyen Chu Hoi, "Kinh tế biển Việt Nam từ góc nhìn chiến lược" [Vietnam Marine Economics from a Strategic Perspective], *Business Forum*, 3/9/2015, <http://enternews.vn/kinh-te-bien-viet-nam-tu-goc-nhin-chien-luoc-91215.html>, retrieved 25/10/2017.

¹ *Để có một thương hiệu biển Việt Nam bền vững* [Towards A Vietnamese Sustainable Maritime Brand], Sea and Island Data Center, http://vodoc.vn/de-co-mot-thuong-hieu-bien-viet-nam-ben-vung_137.news.aspx, retrieved 25/10/2017.

⁴⁹ Xuan Lan, "Gần 36 triệu người Việt dùng điện thoại di động truy cập mạng xã hội hàng ngày" [Nearly 36 Million Vietnamese Use Mobile Phones to Access Social Networks Daily], *VietTimes*, 2/5/2017, <https://viettimes.vn/gan-36-trieu-nguoi-viet-dung-di-dong-truy-cap-mang-xa-hoi-hang-ngay-120912.html>, retrieved 1/11/2017.

⁵⁰ "Viet Nam among the Most Vulnerable to Cyber threats", *Viet Nam News*, 10/2/2017.

⁵¹ "Độ mở của nền kinh tế và vấn đề đặt ra" [The Openness of the Economy and Problems Posed], *Government E-Newspaper*, 13/5/2014, <http://baochinhphu.vn/Kinh-te/Do-mo-cua-nen-kinh-te-va-van-de-dat-ra/199039.vgp>, retrieved 1/11/2017.

⁵² *Ibid.*

Though operating under the rubric of equality and mutual benefit, not until 2016 when, for the first time, the country registered a significant trade surplus (over US\$ 2.5 billion).⁵³ Imports and exports depend on the direct foreign investment sector. With the completion and implementation of the new generation FTAs, Vietnam will be presented with more opportunities, but making full use of them requires institutional, legal, policy and human resource preparation sooner rather than later.⁵⁴

In short, notwithstanding achievements, in the long run, Vietnam has to carry out many puzzling "twin tasks": pursuing faster growth while ensuring high-quality development, resolving not only traditional but also emerging problems, defending national interests while maintaining peace, stability, and friendship with other countries. Experience shows that small countries tend to face constant crises and unexpected situations in a more defensive manner compared to larger countries. Vietnam has successfully applied many strategic thinking lessons and skills such as linking Vietnam's security and development with the region and the world, tapping into major trends, upholding principles but being flexible and prudent in diplomatic measures, persistent and resolute in policy implementation, quick to adapt to new strategic circumstances. However, with the challenges and issues mentioned above Vietnam needs to continue to change, at least in strategic thinking and applied skills.

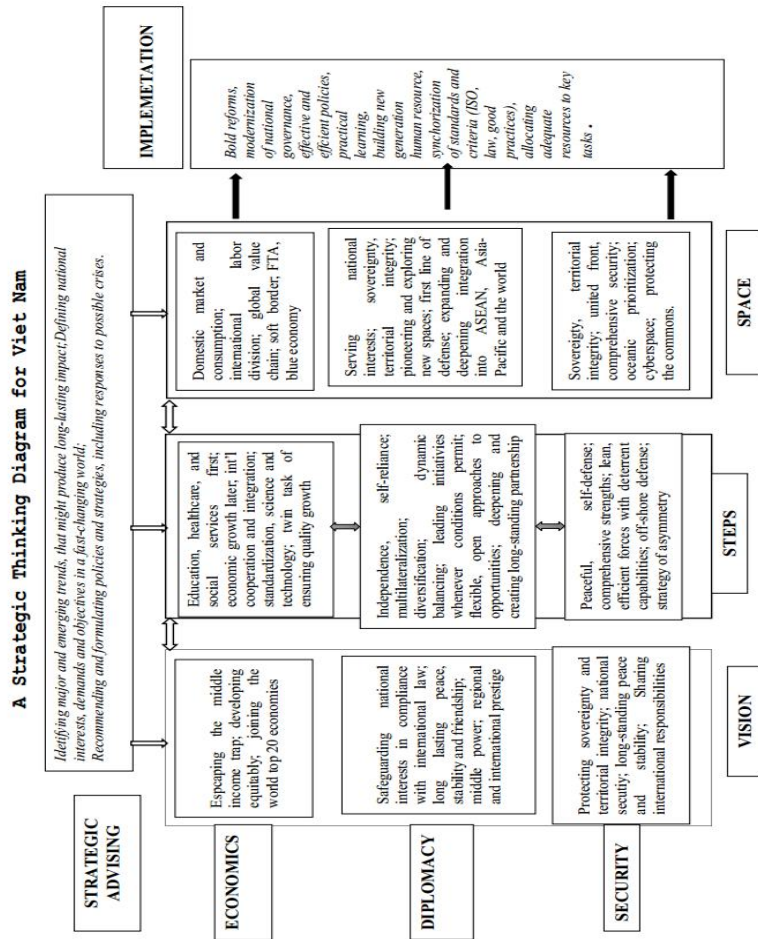
Apply strategic thinking to Vietnam

⁵³ “Năm 2016, cán cân thương mại có thặng dư, 2,52 tỷ USD” [2016 Saw the Trade Balance Record a Surplus of USD \$ 2.52 billion], *VietStock*, 19/1/2017.

⁵⁴ For example, dealing with labor mobility or improving the judicial system to meet the high standards stipulated by the agreements.

Based on the aforementioned analysis, this paper proposes a "strategic thinking" diagram as a source of reference for researchers and policymakers at present and in the future. Elements interacting with one another in a whole: vision is associated with space and specific plans of action, while there is an economic - diplomatic - security nexus, creating a uniformed national strategy. That process starts from thinking, planning to operationalizing and implementing policies.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ See, for example, Vu Khoan, “An ninh, phát triển và ảnh hưởng trong hoạt động đối ngoại” [Security, Development and Influence in External Relations Activities], *Journal of International Studies*, 12/1993; Vu Duong Huan (2007), “Về vấn đề đổi mới tư duy trong hoạt động đối ngoại của Việt Nam” [On the Issue of Reform of Thinking in Vietnam's External Relations Activities], *Journal of International Studies*, 3/2017; Nguyen Xuan Phuc (2017), “Một Việt Nam năng động, hội nhập và phát triển ở châu Á - Thái Bình Dương” [A Dynamic, Integrating and Developing Vietnam in the Asia-Pacific], *Zing.vn*, 8/11/2017, <https://news.zing.vn/mot-viet-nam-nang-dong-hoi-nhap-va-phat-trien-o-chau-a-tbd-post794142.html>, retrieved 30/11/2017.



From a strategic perspective, such documents and tools as "Doi Moi 2.0"⁵⁶ or Reform for "the Dragon Age".⁵⁷ Report "Vietnam 2035": Towards Prosperity, Creativity, Justice and Democracy” authored by the

⁵⁶ See, for example, Nguyen Sy Dung, “Đổi mới 2.0” [Innovation 2.0], *The Light*, 10/4/2017.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Huynh Buu Son, *Giấc mơ hòa rồng* [The Dragon Dream], (Hanoi: Lao động Publishing House, 2016).

Ministry of Planning and Investment and the World Bank offer useful suggestions.⁵⁸ Vietnam should simultaneously aim at multiple goals such as escaping the middle income trap, achieving sustainable growth, embarking on the Industrial Revolution 4.0, and bringing Vietnam to the league of the top 20 biggest economies in the world. From the foreign policy standpoint, it is important to take advantage of major favorable trends, understand nouveaux developments in international politics and economy, protecting and promoting national interests and image in the region and beyond, *contemplating the goal of becoming a middle power*. In the coming time, in terms of role and influence, Vietnam should make clear whether Vietnam should join a group of ASEAN leaders, or take the lead in certain areas such as securing Mekong water resources and responding to climate change. From the security perspective, Vietnam should realize national goals, promote the fine traditions of the army and security forces, share Vietnamese experiences, tackle emerging challenges more effectively, and join the international community in the areas of peacekeeping, disarmament, and anti-terrorism, etc. Participating in international joint efforts helps improve capacity, step up modernization, and open up new defense cooperation.

Regarding the steps necessary to be taken, a paradox (but a sensible one) is that to attain long-term growth policymakers should not be dictated by short-term goals. Only by persistently training high quality human resource (equipped with adequate level of knowledge, skills, and health), as demanded by the real economy can Vietnam grow in a more sustainable and long-lasting fashion. Be aware that for this quality human resource to come of age, it can take 5 or 10 years. The 6th Plenum of the Central Committee in October 2017 highlighted the theme of "improving health and quality of life", a smart move, taking into account

⁵⁸ See, for example, *Vietnam 2035: Towards Prosperity, Creativity, Fairness and Democracy*, (Hanoi: World Bank, Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2016).

the current needs of the country in this regard.⁵⁹ Similarly, professionalization of civil servants on the basis of modernization of national governance is the next logical strategic step.⁶⁰ Environmental protection and economic growth do not exclude each other, for example, if agriculture is not just quantity driven but also quality-oriented.⁶¹ As for external relations, Vietnam should adhere to the guiding principles, and in the meantime, be flexible in terms of specific implementing measures; concurrently, substance should be the primary criterion for generating longstanding interwoven interests and values with other countries. In particular, for initiatives proposed by major countries of which Vietnam cannot afford to stand outside, it is advisable that the country actively partake in their early stages to minimize possible adverse impacts while being able to take advantage of available resources and co-write rules of the game. The upgrading of relationships to strategic level should also be approached more flexibly based on the

⁵⁹ “Announcement of the 6th Plenum of the Central Committee of the 11th Party Central Committee”, *People’s Daily*, 11/10/2017, <http://www.nhandan.com.vn/chinhtri/item/34366002-thong-bao-hoi-nghi-lan-thu-sau-ban-chap-hanh-trung-uong-dang-khoa-xii.html>, retrieved 21/10/2017.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Tran Huyen, “Nâng cao chất lượng nguồn nhân lực đáp ứng yêu cầu công nghiệp hóa, hiện đại hóa nông nghiệp, nông thôn” [Improve the Quality of Human Resource to Meet the Requirements of Industrialization and Modernization of Agricultural and Rural Areas], *Communist Magazine*, 15/2/2017, <http://www.tapchiconsan.org.vn/Home/kinh-te/2017/43501/Nang-cao-chat-luong-nguon-nhan-luc-dap-ung-yeu-cau-cong.aspx>, retrieved 22/10/2017; Hai Phong, “Nâng cao chất lượng đào tạo nguồn nhân lực quốc gia” [Improve the Quality of National Human Resource Training], *Great Solidarity Newspaper*, 10/11/2016, <http://m.daidoanket.vn/tin-tuc/xa-hoi/nang-cao-chat-luong-dao-tao-nguon-nhan-luc-quoc-gia-133469>, retrieved 22/10/2017.

⁶¹ See, for example, “Sản xuất nông nghiệp: Chất lượng hơn số lượng” [Agricultural Production: Quality over Quantity], *Investment Newspaper*, 11/8/2016; Khanh Nguyen, “Không để Việt Nam thành bãi thải công nghệ” [Not to Let Vietnam Become a Technology Dumping Ground], *People E-Newspaper*, 26/2017, <http://www.nhandan.com.vn/congnghe/thong-tin-so/item/33044902-khong-de-viet-nam-thanh-bai-thai-cong-nghe.html>, retrieved 1/11/2017.

country’s foreign policy guiding principles and as suggested by circumstances. For example, drawing on the momentum over the past successful 20 years, should Vietnam forge a Strategic Partnership for Peace and Development with the United States? The tie with China still has room that should be explored and expanded for further development. Maintaining the guiding principles while taking elastic approaches to major powers can help de-sensitize the country’s position when there is a need to strengthen relationship with one particular side.⁶² The parameter is not to become any other country’s ally as it goes against the desired dynamic balance of power school of thought, and because of the historical lessons. On national defense and security, Vietnam should build up comprehensive power, and in the meantime, focus on building lean and effective forces with proper deterrence capability under the guidance of “the strategy of asymmetry”; take diplomacy, including defense foreign relations, as the “first line of defense”.⁶³

Vietnam has set a clear path to strategic domains, yet ample investment is required to materialize political decisions. For example, Vietnam’s candidature for the non-permanent member of the UN Security Council 2020-2021 is an act of expansion of strategic spaces thanks to the far-reaching role of this forum. With a seat on the United National Security Council, Vietnam can both protect and promote national interests, and in the meantime, have the chance to maintain, and even co-author common rules. Vietnam should have a detailed national plan in response to grand-scale initiatives led by major countries such as

⁶² One successful example is Vietnam welcoming the Secretary General and President of China Xi Jinping and the United States President Donald Trump to visit Hanoi on the same day in November 2017.

⁶³ See, for example, 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*, National Institute for Defense Studies Joint Research Series, No. 5 (2010): 107-122.

the Belt and Road (China) and Free and Open Indo-Pacific (the United States). The aforementioned findings show that Vietnam should, on the one hand, continue to deepen economic integration, be part of the global value chain, prioritize in-depth investment projects, and on the other hand, attach greater importance to the domestic sphere in order to optimize the market of 95 million people (ranking 15th in the world and living in a dynamic development region). Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), which Vietnam has agreed to or is negotiating, testify to the thinking of taking the region as an expanded "boundary" for national development if appropriately prepared from inside. Another urgent measure is to advance maritime domain awareness and governance through international cooperation, in the fields of not only oil and gas but also services and logistics... (taking stock of the Singaporean and Polish experiences). Considering the blue economy a direction for future development will require restructuring and adjusting policies as soon as possible; for example, Vietnam should quickly establish a comprehensive and integrated mechanism to ensure more effective state management of islands that has been successfully applied by many countries (interdisciplinary, interagency, and inter-regional thinking).⁶⁴ The private sector should be further engaged to generate extra motivation, e.g. in environmental protection, shipbuilding or fishery. Vietnam should diversify maritime services to create more value added industries, ...⁶⁵ In the context of the East Sea, pending an ultimate solution, in parallel with the assurance of sovereignty and security,

⁶⁴ For example, the Law on Natural Resources and Environment of the Sea and Islands in 2015 falls short of the regulations that create the basis for this management method, and thus it does not help overcome the "local interests" thinking. See, for example, Doan Thi Thanh My, "Quản lý tổng hợp, thống nhất biển và hải đảo Việt Nam đảm bảo sự phát triển bền vững" [Integrated, Uniformed Management of the Sea and Islands of Vietnam to Ensure Sustainable Development], *Environment Journal*, Vol 3 (2016).

⁶⁵ "Đầu tư vào kinh tế biển, du lịch là hướng đi khôn ngoan"[Investing in the Marine Economy and Tourism is a Wise Move], *Vietnam Economy*, 21/3/2017.

Vietnam needs more initiatives to develop maritime services, protect the environment, promote scientific research, apply good practices, strengthen capacity and build modern logistics and supply infrastructure, integrate and connect with bases on the shore (open and creative thinking, practical cooperation thinking). Vietnam should invest more in "new space exploration" projects, adding to the overall national strategy such as "cyberspace", "soft border", and "off-shore and in-depth defense".

Conclusion

This paper attempts to analyze some of the fundamental issues on strategic and applied thinking, focusing on emerging factors and the external dimension of national policies. In reality, to envision an overarching national strategy for the next stage, one needs to carefully examine cultural elements and draw on the historical lessons of the country and others' successes. In terms of scope, this research does not aim to answer all the questions but invite further in-depth study.

Preliminary results, however, are sufficient to indicate that requirements for strategic thinking include consistency and clarity in setting long term goals; for instance, whether Vietnam wants to become a middle power. Another important question is how to take advantage of new strategic spaces to choose the right steps accordingly.⁶⁶

In fact, the case of Vietnam has shown that (i) the country has gained notable achievements; yet, to neutralize challenges, make long-term breakthroughs for quality development requires extra conditionality; (ii) a top priority should be having foresight and an open

⁶⁶ For example, according to a forecast by Pricewaterhouse Cooper, by 2050, Vietnam will become the 22nd largest economy in the world. Pricewaterhouse Cooper, *The World in 2050 - Will the Shift in Economic Power Continue?*, (2/2015): 3.

mindset about connectivity, interweaving interests and values with partners, ensuring long-term objectives of security, development, and influence; (iii) education, health and social services should be more amply invested, and in the medium term, these aspects should become a priority higher than that of economic growth, with a view to training high quality human resource; (iv) the maritime domain should be recognized as the national survival and development space; therefore, more actions should be taken to improve the ability to control and produce value added services; detect and exploit more effectively "new spaces" in the digital age and in the process of cross-border and inter-regional integration; at the same time, examine the possibility of the country joining other international forums and spearheading initiatives to promote national interests and co-write rules of the game; (v) Vietnam, while being a role model for the realization of the Millennium Development Goals, should study more carefully international success stories; the common denominator in the strategy of Singapore, Poland and Israel whose sizes range from being small to very small, is the making of consistent and persistent foreign policy; and yet, the principle of consistency and persistence should also go hand in hand with an open, supple, practical mindset; and due to the chronic condition of asymmetric capability, dynamically build up new national strengths and postures on the basis of identifying feasible connecting point between domestic and external resources; diplomacy should take a step ahead of other processes, proactively promote shared interests and values with partners, minimizing possible adverse impacts while being able to bring relationships forward, contributing to the achievement of development goals and off-shore and deep defense of the country.

With such a strategic outlook, Vietnam can reach even greater successes and even breakthroughs within the next generation./.

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