

CHAPTER 8

Vietnam's Security Challenges : Hanoi's New Approach to National Security and Implications to Defense and Foreign Policies

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Introduction

In the post Cold-War era, the improved relations between and among major powers have been achieved, thus enabling states of the world to build and benefit from an overall ease of international tension. Coupled with the state of increased economic and social interdependence, the military dimension in the national security perception has been reduced to a great extent.² This situation as a result helps to provide new perspectives on fundamental questions related to national security and strategy to ensure it.

National security, according to the established international relations theoretical approaches, relate to the survival of the states existing in the anarchical environment of international politics that allow continuous wars and conflicts. Yet, as it has been argued, the nature of international politics in the Third World has more to do with the survival of the ruling regimes that act in the name of their countries. The regime survival is of greater significance to the national leaders in the context in which fundamental economic and political changes always create new forces challenging the ruling regimes.³

¹ Arguments in this paper reflect the author's own view. These arguments have also been introduced at the conference themed "Conflicting Claims to the South China Sea," held on March 25, 2010 at the Center for Vietnamese Philosophy, Culture, and Society, (Temple University, PA, USA).

² Muthiah Alagappa, "Systemic Change, Security, and Governance in the Asia-Pacific," in Chang Heng Chee ed., *The New Asia-Pacific Order* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, 1997), p. 67. See also Ian Clark, *The Post-Cold War Order: The Spoils of Peace*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 197-199.

³ Brian Job, *The Insecurity Dilemma: National, Regime, and State Securities in the Third World*, p. 13. See also Alan Collins, *The Security Dilemma of Southeast Asia*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), p. 91. Mohammed Ayoob, "The Security Predicament of the Third World State: Reflections on State Making in a Comparative Perspective," in Brian Job, *The Insecurity Dilemma: National Security of Third World States*, p. 77.

The case of Vietnam since 1986 is not an exception. The way the policy makers identify security challenges to the country has been influenced by the perceived challenges and threats to the ruling regime. As a result, the policy to cope with them can become very different from those influenced by the logics of state survival. To be more specific, foreign and defense policies have become more comprehensive and cooperative, rather than exclusive and competitive.

Identifying Security Challenges and Policy Implications

The 13th Politburo Resolution of May 1988 introduced a new approach to security. It argued that three factors, namely, “economic weaknesses, political isolation, and economical blockade are major threats to our country’s security and independence.” Put in the context of late 1980s when the country faced with severe economic crisis as and when home industrial and agricultural production was on the verge of collapse and sources of external aid dried up, the regime’s performance, hence, credibility and legitimacy were under scrutiny. In other words, the policy makers in Vietnam laid a greater focus on internal dimension of national security, namely, regime security.

This could be inferred from the policy designed to cope with those challenges. A combination of the following factors —listed in the order of importance— should be achieved to ensure the country’s security. The Resolution of May 1988 said in part: “With a strong economy, just-enough national defense capability, and expanded international relations, we will be more able to maintain our independence and successfully construct socialism.” Tran Quang Co, Deputy Foreign Minister, wrote in 1992, “At present, the enemies of Vietnam are poverty, famine, and backwardness; and the friends of Vietnam are all those who support us in the fight against these enemies.”⁴ From this perception, greater importance was given to the expansion of foreign relations as the necessary condition for overcoming political isolation and economic blockade and for building “a strong economy,” which is associated with integrating into the regional and international markets on the basis of new division of

⁴ Tran Quang Co, “The gioi va chau A —Thai binh duong sau chien tranh lanh [The post-Cold War World and Asia-Pacific],” *Tap chi Nghien cuu quoc te [IIR International Studies Review]*, December 1992, p. 7.

labor.⁵ To put in other words, this was a new concept of comprehensive security that no longer gives priority to military affairs but allows the conduct of a new foreign policy to play a bigger role in ensuring national security and supporting the economic development of Vietnam.⁶

Many now believed that the Resolution also introduced a new perception of security, which could be considered of having the nature of a comprehensive security approach. The 13th CPV Politburo Resolution declared that it had introduced a “comprehensive change in the overall foreign policy,” and “a fundamental change in foreign policy thinking relating to matters of security and development, national interests and international obligations, as well as alliances and rally of international forces.”⁷ The Resolution stressed, “To preserve peace and to develop the economy are the highest strategic objectives and interests of the whole party and people in Vietnam.”⁸ In addition to this, if Hanoi had seen security as strictly military and exclusive, it now believed that “security of any country should be based on its conditions of scientific and economic developments and at the same time, is mutually dependent on the security of other countries.”⁹

In January 1994, when the CPV held a mid-term Congress, the list of Four Threats to national security was introduced to include (i) poverty and lagging behind other countries in terms of economics, (ii) deviation from socialist orientation, (iii)

⁵ The theme of Vietnam participating in the international division of labor was discussed in Hanoi since early 1980s. High-ranking officials including Nguyen Co Thach and Phan Van Khai argued in favor of the increased economic interdependence on the global scale and a new type of labor division outside the socialist bloc. See Gareth Porter, “The Transformation of Vietnam’s Worldview: From Two Camps to Interdependence,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 19, No. 1, June 1997, pp. 1–19. A new foreign policy motto emerged to call for “the economic diplomacy,” thus showing the combination of economic and diplomatic means in the search for security and development and further diminishing the role that military could play.

⁶ Nguyen Vu Tung, “Vietnam’s New Concept of Security,” pp. 409–410.

⁷ Text of the 13th Politburo Resolution, May 1988, p. 17.

⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 3–4.

⁹ *Ibid*, Nguyen Co Thach’s Interview. Ogasawara and others suggested that Hanoi’s new perception of security is closer to the concepts of “comprehensive security” and “mutual security” that countries in East and Southeast Asia have adopted. See Ogasawara Takayuki, “Vietnam’s Security Policy in the Post-Cambodia Period: Diplomatic Dimension,” in Dao Huy Ngoc and Matsunaga Nobuo eds., *Asia-Pacific and Vietnam–Japan Relations* (Hanoi: Institute for International Relations, 1994), pp. 107–108. See also, Nguyen Vu Tung, “Vietnam’s New Concept of Security,” in Kurt Radtke and Raymond Feddema eds., *Comprehensive Security in Asia: Views from Asia and the West on a Changing Security Environment* (Boston: Brill, 2000), pp. 409–410. See also, Nguyen Vu Tung, “Vietnam’s Membership Of ASEAN: A Constructivist Interpretation,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, December 2007.

corruption, red tape, and inefficient bureaucracy, and (iv) peaceful evolution by hostile forces.¹⁰ The list of threats showed that by 1994, Vietnam was no longer regionally and internationally isolated and the leadership felt that their regime was less vulnerable to challenges from outside. Poverty and economic backwardness, as well as corruption, inefficiency and red-tape, not the threats from outside, directly challenged the legitimacy of the CPV leadership. In addition, leaders in Hanoi believed that the threats of peaceful evolution would be less dangerous if the regime could improve the living conditions of the people and reduce corruption.¹¹ In other words, threats from within were seen with greater saliency. Deputy Foreign Minister Vu Khoan wrote in 1993:

Reality in many countries has shown that the threats to security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of a country lie within the national borders. Reality has also shown that in many cases, even without the element of foreign aggression, security and sovereignty were challenged and territories were divided because of mistakes in economic, cultural, ethnic, and religious policies. The developmental backwardness will reduce the people's belief, cause social problems, and inevitably lead to threats to security, public order, and even regime survival.¹²

This threat perception remains unchanged since after the events of September 11, 2001. In the IXth CPV Central Committee Resolution of January 2004, the official analysis of world situation was provided as follows:

After September 11, 2001, the world situation became very complicated. "Terrorist" and "anti-terrorist" activities became salient issues while regional wars and armed conflicts with religious and ethnic causes continue to take place in many parts of the world. War-like and extremist forces implement the policies of imposition,

¹⁰ See also The CPV, *Documents of the IXth National Congress*, p. 15; and Nguyen Vu Tung, "Vietnam's New Concept of Security," p. 420.

¹¹ Nguyen Vu Tung, "Vietnam's New Concept of Security in the Context of Doi Moi," pp. 405–425. In 1996, the CPV stressed: red-tape and corruption will lead to loss of socialist directions, which in turn would provide a good ground for peaceful evolution. See The Communist Party of Vietnam, *Van kien dai hoi VIII Dang Cong san Viet nam [Documents of the VIII CPV Congress]*, (Hanoi: National Politics Publishing House, 1996), p. 79.

¹² Vu Khoan, "An ninh, Phat trien va Anh huong trong Quan he Quoc te [Security, Development, and Influence in Foreign Relations] in MOFA" *Integrating into the World and Preserving Our Characteristics*, pp. 209–210.

intervention, and armed aggression. Yet, peace, cooperation, and development still remain as the mainstream of the world situation.¹³

The sources of concerns, according to the same document, lie in “the low level of productivity, quality, efficiency, and competitiveness of the economy; the graveness of salient social problems including corruption, degradation of morality and lifestyle; increased activities of ‘peaceful evolution’ and pressures on ‘democracy’, ‘human rights’, ethnic, religious issues by hostile forces that are providing a helping hand to the reactionary and politically opportunistic forces operating in Vietnam.” While considering them as “hidden and increasing dangers (nguy co) that create no-small obstacles to the course of industrialization and modernization of Vietnam and threat the country’s political stability,”¹⁴ it is clear that the CPV sees the threats from the domestic perspective: the threat to national security seems to be of lesser concern than that to political stability, i.e. the regime. The Political Report at the IXth CPV National Congress read: “To defend the socialist country is to defend the independence, sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity, national security, social order and safety, national culture, the Party, the State, the people and the socialist regime, as well as the course of renovation, and national interests.”¹⁵

The Xth CPV National Congress in 2006 continued the familiar threat analyses. The political report stressed the following threats to Vietnam:

- *Further economically lagging behind many countries in the region and in the world still exists; Vietnam remains as one of the least developed countries.*
- *Increasing political and ethical degradation among party members that closely related to corruption, red-tape, and wastefulness.*
- *Deviation from socialist orientations economic and social policies and lesser vigilance against “peaceful evolution.”*
- *Hostile forces continue to realize the scheme of peaceful evolution to cause unrest and instability and to change the political regime in Vietnam under the pretext of democracy and human rights.*¹⁶

¹³ “Politburo Report at the CPV 9th Central Committee Plenum (IXth Tenure),” p. 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁵ The CPV, *The IXth National Congress Documents*, p. 117.

¹⁶ The CPV, *The Xth National Congress Documents*, p. 125.

It, therefore, seems that Vietnam has adopted the comprehensive approach to security which attaches greater importance to economic development and growth — the most important indicator of the ruling regime's credibility and legitimacy — which requires a peaceful and stable external environment as the prerequisite and which implies that sources of troubles are from within. That helped to explain why since 1991, the Communist Party of Vietnam has been following a being-a-friend-to-all foreign policy. Indeed, the new foreign policy constituted a “fundamental shift in thought and practice” related to national security and the means to ensure it, as the then Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam recalled in 1995.¹⁷

In the implementation of such a foreign policy, Vietnam sought to end the Cambodia issue, widen relations with all countries, and particularly the neighboring countries and big powers, and especially develop trade links and attract foreign investments to Vietnam. As a result, the state of economic embargo and political isolation against Vietnam ended in 1995. In addition, Vietnam is quite comfortably integrating itself into the rest of the regional and the world.

Only in the context of the leadership's new world view and the expansion of Vietnam's foreign relations, which was made easier by the general ease of international tensions and the tendency toward greater regional cooperation in East Asia following the end of the Cold War, Hanoi increasingly felt that the threats to its security were reduced. Moreover, the diversification and multilateralization of Hanoi's foreign relations further contributed to enhance Hanoi's sense of security after the collapse of the Soviet Union: having more friends means having fewer enemies. Michael Williams quoted a Vietnamese diplomat as saying about the role that diplomacy played in the new context, “For the first time, we are relying on diplomacy to safeguard security. In the past, it was only used as a crown to military victory.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Nguyen Manh Cam quoted General Secretary Do Muoi in “On the Implementation of a New Foreign Policy,” in *Integrating into the World and Preserving our National Identity*, (Hanoi: The National Politics Publishing House, 1995), p. 160.

¹⁸ Michael C. William, *Vietnam at the Crossroad*, (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1992), p. 60.

New Threats to National Security

In preparations for the next CPV Congress and in the context of the on-going global economic crisis, policy-makers in Hanoi are revising major political documents. With regard to threats to national security, the approach is still comprehensive and the regime survival continues to be a priority. Yet, new threats have been specified. One of the working documents stresses that the threats to national security and developments include:

- *Further economically lagging behind many countries in the region and in the world still exists,*
- *Hostile forces continue to realize the scheme of peaceful evolution to cause instability and to change the political regime in Vietnam under the pretext of democracy and human rights,*
- *The task of defending sovereignty and territorial integrity becomes greater in the context of complicated developments in the region,*
- *Global issues related to energy security, food security, climate change, terrorism etc, become more urgent, causing negative effects and threatening sustainable development and stability in Vietnam.*

The White Paper on National Defense by the Ministry of Defense —released in December 2009— provides similar analyses about security threats: “Vietnam faces with diversified and complicated security challenges. (i) Vietnam’s economy has been in danger of further lagging behind due to insufficient resilience while coping with the serious impact of the global financial crisis and economic recession. Though the national security has been maintained, many factors, both internal and external, that cause socio-political instability, have not yet been thoroughly eliminated. (ii) Democratic freedom, religious freedom, and human rights have been abused by hostile forces in order to undermine the great national solidarity, and to incite violence and separatism in some areas of the country. (iii) Concerning the disputes over sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the territories in the East Sea, the complicated developments so far have seriously affected many activities and the maritime economic development of Vietnam. (iv) Non-traditional security issues such as illegal trafficking of weapons and drugs; piracy, organized trans-national crimes,

terrorism, illegal migration and immigration; environmental degradation, climate change, and epidemics continue to concern Vietnam.”¹⁹

We can see that besides threats to the regime's survival that have root causes mostly from inside, those that come from outside have been identified. They appear in the forms of non-traditional security threats and territorial disputes.

But these threats are different in nature, and therefore, imply different policies to cope with them. Non-traditional security challenges are now higher on the agenda as they become more salient in the number and seriousness of cases. Activities related to fighting terrorism, transnational crimes, tackling environmental issues, and combating infectious diseases are in fact getting higher attention from, and enjoying concerted efforts by, a wider collectivity of states.²⁰ In other words, non-traditional security issues are becoming a new rationale for more international cooperation: if traditional security issues in most of the cases increase the chance for conflict among hostile states and forge cooperation among a limited number of states, non-traditional security issues have provided a broad base for a majority of states to participate in internationally cooperative activities and projects. In other words, while traditional security threats lead to exclusive cooperation non-traditional security challenges give rise to an inclusive and more effective mode of international collaboration. In addition to this, military establishments are employed to engage in cooperative projects to handle non-traditional security threats.²¹

Territorial disputes are increasingly become salient in foreign relations of Vietnam. To be more specific, territorial disputes between Vietnam and Brunei, the Philippines,

¹⁹ *National Defense White Paper*, pp. 10–11. In an interview in December 2009, Deputy Defense Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh said: “Disputes over sovereignty in the South China Sea have caused Vietnamese national defense new concerns and represented new challenges.” *VietnamNet*, December 8, 2009.

²⁰ See, for example, Ralf Emmers and Leonard C. Sebastian, “Terrorism and Transnational Crime in Southeast Asian International Relations,” in Donald E. Weatherbee, *International Relations in Southeast Asia: The Struggle for Autonomy*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2005), pp. 156–186.

²¹ Nguyen Vu Tung, “Non-Traditional Security Challenges In East Asia: Prospects For Interstate Cooperation,” a paper prepared for the first Asia Foundation funded Trilateral Dialogues held in Nha Trang (Vietnam in October 2006) among Vietnamese, Chinese, and American scholars and officials. For the records of Vietnam's armed forces international cooperation, see, Carl Thayer, “Vietnam's Foreign Relations: The Strategic Defense Dimension,” paper presented at the Fourth Euro-Viet Conference, (October 2008).

and Malaysia and between Vietnam and China over the Spratly Islands and those between Vietnam and China over the Parcel Islands are the remaining ones with bleak possibility for acceptable solutions in the foreseeable future.

As territorial disputes in the South China Sea become more salient, the threat to territorial integrity has been increasingly felt in Hanoi. Yet, threat to territorial integrity has been perceived in a wider context of a comprehensive approach to security that has been introduced since 1986. As discussed above, maintaining regime stability and legitimacy continues to depend to a large extent on the regime's performance, especially in terms of effectively coping with all the perceived threats. In other words, Hanoi must address the relationship between managing territorial disputes in the South China Sea and maintaining the regime legitimacy.

Yet, to strike a balance in this relationship is not an easy thing to do, for several reasons. In the first place, territorial disputes can conveniently arouse nationalism and hostile feelings toward the other countries party to the disputes. This xenophobic sentiment might run counter to Hanoi's efforts at making friend with neighboring countries; at the same time, the disputes over Spratly Islands can become a point of disunity among ASEAN claimants with regard to seeking solutions among themselves and between ASEAN and China. A failure to forge a common ASEAN position to the South China Sea disputes might challenge the Hanoi's performance in the field of foreign affairs, whose achievements have helped to boost the regime's legitimacy in the period of Doi Moi.

In addition, territorial disputes can increase the level of criticism by Vietnamese people, including those living overseas, against what has been described as a weak position adopted by Hanoi in dealing with China in the border issues. This type of criticism put the regime's performances (in other areas as well) under closer scrutiny and creates pressures for more transparency, as critical views always find territorial issues the most convenient point of reference to judge the regime's effectiveness and legitimacy. More importantly, a failure to forge a common understanding and consensus in Vietnam as far as the South China Sea disputes are concerned might harm Hanoi's efforts to build national unity in Vietnam — a prerequisite to boost the regime's legitimacy in the period of Doi Moi.

Secondly, territorial disputes can make it more appealing to develop military capabilities and procure new weapon systems to support territorial claims and deal with anticipated conflicts over disputed areas. This new priority might affect the priority for Vietnam to concentrate its limited resource on economic development and growth, especially when Vietnam has been hit by the current economic crisis. At the same time, it can do harm to Hanoi's efforts at confidence-building, giving rise to competitive strategies to develop the disputed areas especially those believed to possess rich natural resources, renewing the security dilemma in the region, and negatively affecting the general trend toward regional stability and cooperation.

Last but not least, the importance of South China Sea is increasingly attached to Vietnam's economic development and growth on which the regime's legitimacy rests. On February 2007, the Party Central Committee introduced a resolution coded 09-NQ/TW on Vietnam's Maritime Strategy for 2020 which stressed that the Eastern Sea is of strategic geo-economic and geo-political importance to the cause of national development.²² As the logics of comprehensive security suggests, a strong economy is a decisive factor for national defense and an effective indicator for regime legitimacy, a strong maritime economy, therefore, is of greater strategic importance. In this connection, the territorial disputes in the Eastern Sea represent the main obstacle to achieving this double goal. Moreover, China's ambitions, its unyielding position on the South China Sea, and the divide-and-rule tactics it applies to other claimants seem to turn the obstacle into an unovercomeable one. In other words, until a fair-to-all solution to the disputes is reached, any meaningful development of the maritime economy in the Eastern Sea area will be met with strong opposition from China.

Indeed, as the disputes heat up, the Vietnamese government seems to have been put in a dilemma where internally it has to introduce more effective measures to protect Vietnam's territorial integrity, maritime interests as well as welfare of people in this sector while externally, it has to avoid making the situation more complicated. It has also to show a firm position on the issues of national interests in the eyes of the

²² According to official statistics, in 2005, the "maritime economy" of Vietnam accounts for 48% of the country's GDP as compared to 49% of 2007 while oil and gas, sea product, sea transportation and services, and tourism sectors respectively account for 64%, 14%, 11%, and 9% of the maritime economy. The resolution set the target for 2020 that the maritime economy will account for between 53 and 55% of the GDP and between 55 and 60% of the total exports.

people while trying not to be seen as adopting a confrontational approach with regard to other claimants. Especially, it has to invest in building more military capabilities to effectively support its claim without losing sight of the priority for economic growth and especially causing suspicion from and worse, military conflicts with other claimants.

Diplomacy Is the First Line of Defense: The Continued Strategy

The question, therefore, might arise: Have these security challenges and concerns found their ways to influence present and future Vietnam overall foreign and defense policies? The tentative answer is not positive, and the following will explain why.

In the first place, the present foreign policy still attaches great importance to the maintenance of peaceful and stable external environment. The Xth CPV Congress stressed that Vietnam will continue the foreign policy of openness, multilateralisation and diversification of international relations, proactively integrating into the rest of the world and participating in the process of regional and international cooperation.²³ An armed conflict with any country, especially ASEAN states and China will be detrimental to Vietnam's foreign policy goals to serve the foreign policy objectives of "maintaining a peaceful environment and creating favorable conditions for the reforms."²⁴ This principle has been reflected in the defense policy. The National Defense White Paper said: "Vietnam always regards the maintenance of peaceful and stable environment for socio-economic development, industrialization and modernization, building the socialism-oriented market economy as the top national interest, and the consistent goal of its national defense policy."²⁵ In short, territorial disputes will be solved by peaceful means. The White Paper stressed: "Vietnam's consistent policy is to solve both historical and newly emerging disputes over territorial sovereignty in land and at sea through peaceful means on the basis of international laws."²⁶ In other words, diplomacy continues to be the first line of defense. Deputy Defense Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh said: "Vietnam is a party among others to the dispute in the South China Sea. The policy of the Vietnamese state and that of Vietnamese national defense

²³ The CPV, *The Xth National Congress Documents*, p. 125.

²⁴ The CPV, *The Xth National Congress Documents*, p. 125.

²⁵ *White Paper*, p. 11.

²⁶ *White Paper*, p. 12.

is consistently trying to solve the dispute through peaceful means while resolutely defending sovereignty and territorial integrity based on international laws and forging greater friendship and understanding between Vietnam and neighboring countries including those concerned to the South China Sea.”²⁷

Secondly and related to the above-mentioned point, with countries partied to the territorial disputes, Vietnam is enjoying overall good relations. Sino-Vietnamese relations are developing in political, security, defense, and economic, social fields. After the two countries normalized relations in 1991, China and Vietnam have following the relationship along the line of “good friendship, good comradeship, good partnership, and good neighborliness.” In June 2008, the two countries elevated the bilateral relationship into one of “comprehensive strategic co-operative partnership.”²⁸

Even territorial disputes, other than Spratlys and Paracels, have been settled through negotiations. On November 18, 2009, China and Vietnam signed a package of three agreements on the demarcation of their 1,300-kilometre land boundary following the land boundary treaty signed in 1999 and the establishment of a joint committee for land border demarcation in 2001.²⁹ In addition, the two countries signed Beibu Gulf demarcation treaty in 1999. High level talks have begun on the South China Sea issue. General Le Van Dung, chief of the People's Army's Political General Bureau told the media that during his recent visit to China the two sides had discussed solutions to the East Sea issues. He said, “We have tried to resolve in whatever way possible to settle the issues. In the near future we will discuss with the Chinese on demarcation of maritime boundaries between the two countries and I am convinced the situation will gradually become stable.”³⁰ In fact, the first official talk between Vietnam and China has been held in Beijing on the demarcation of the area off the Tonkin Gulf. These developments have suggested that remaining territorial disputes between the

²⁷ *VietnamNet*, December 8, 2009.

²⁸ For a record of Sino-Vietnam relations, see, Carl Thayer, “The Structure of Vietnam–China Relations: 1991–2008, Foreign Relations: The Strategic Defense Dimension,” paper presented at the Third International Conference on Vietnam Studies, (December 2008).

²⁹ The agreements include a protocol on demarcation of the land boundary, an agreement on land boundary management regime and an agreement on land port and its management regime. *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific*, November 18, 2009 Wednesday.

³⁰ *VietNamNet Bridge* on January 1, 2010.

two countries would be solved by means of negotiations, although a certain level of instability and unpredictability could be expected. In short, territorial disputes have been relatively isolated from the general trend toward greater cooperation between the two countries.

Thirdly, while war between Vietnam and other ASEAN fellows is unthinkable, many in Vietnam believe that China is too big for the country to engage in an open armed conflict. Vietnam therefore opts to rely on international laws (based on the 1982 UN Law of the Sea) and regional norms (based on the COC signed between China and ASEAN in 2001) while adhering to the core principles of no use of force or threat to use force, no first use of force, and self-restraint. The White Paper stressed: "Vietnam is always ready to negotiate with all parties concerned to find peaceful solutions to those disputes in conformity with regulations of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. While continuously seeking for a long-term solution to the issue, Vietnam advocates that all parties must restrain themselves, strictly abide by DOC, and strive for building COC in order to reach a long-term and fair solution to this complicated issue, turning the East Sea into a sea of peace, friendship, and development."³¹ In an interview in December 2009, Deputy Defense Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh talked: "The complicated situation in the South China Sea is a matter of concern for Vietnamese national defense. Yet, I think that this complicatedness will not lead to military conflict." He went on to explain: in the first place, the general trend in the region and the world does not favor any armed conflict, for it would harm not only the parties to the conflict but also other countries; conflicts do harms to all. In addition, the world has become more civilized; the system of international laws including UNCLOS is increasingly strict and able to ensure favorable conditions for the region and the world to develop.³²

In addition to it, policy makers in Vietnam believe that China is not ready to engage in an open armed conflict over the Spratly islands. They argue that on the one hand, China will be more assertive to support its claims over the disputed areas through building up naval capabilities, consolidating actual occupations in the area, preventing the issues from being internationalized, and shoring up nationalism. But

³¹ *White Paper*, p. 12. *The White Paper* (pp. 11–12) also said that Vietnam advocates against first use of force in international relations.

³² *VietnamNet*, December 8, 2009.

on the other hand, in foreseeable future, the likelihood that China will use force to occupy the Spratlys is low, for the following reasons: (i) China still needs an external environment of stability and peace to focus on economic development, (ii) it needs to substantiate the strategy of “peaceful development” to counter the “China threat” theory, (iii) and Beijing has to take reactions of ASEAN, Japan, and the United States into consideration before deciding to radically change the status quo.³³ In this connection, Vietnam’s membership and its increased stature in ASEAN also suggest that China has to deal with ASEAN as a group, not with individual ASEAN claimants in the Spratlys dispute.

By Way of Conclusion: Defense Policy in a Wider Context

In short, armed conflicts to solve territorial disputes are undesirable and unfeasible for Vietnam. This fact has been reflected in both foreign and defense policies introduced by Hanoi since the reform started in 1986. The National Defense White Paper of 2009 stated: “Proactively preventing and repulsing the dangers of wars are among essential tasks of Vietnam’s national defense in peacetime in order to realize the optimal national defense strategy of protecting its sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and other national interests without resorting to war. Vietnam advocates implementing the national defense strategy through a spectrum of political, economic, diplomatic, socio-cultural and military activities aimed at eradicating the causes of armed conflicts and wars.”³⁴

Table 1: The Defense Budget of Vietnam

| | (Billion VND) | | | |
|----------------|---------------|---------|-----------|-----------|
| | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
| GDP | 839,211 | 973,791 | 1,143,442 | 1,490,000 |
| Defense Budget | 16,278 | 20,577 | 28,922 | 27,024 |
| Share in GDP | 1.872% | 2.194% | 2.529% | 1.813% |

Source: National Defense White Paper, p. 29.

³³ Interviews of the authors with policy makers in Hanoi. According to *VietNamNet Bridge* on January 1, 2010, General Le Van Dung, chief of the People’s Army’s Political General Bureau shrugged off concerns that Vietnam would be involved in any major wars during the next two decades.

³⁴ *White Paper*, p. 13.

So what to make of the Vietnam's calls for modernize its armed forces and its recent plans to buy sophisticated weapon systems?³⁵ With the priority of ensuring a peaceful and stable external environment for economic development and the principles of renouncing the use of force and the threat to use force while multilateralizing and diversifying foreign relations and seeking solutions to disputes through the means of negotiations, Vietnam continues to adopt the approach of developing "a strong economy, just-enough national defense capability, and expanded international relations." The growth of the economy has allowed Vietnam to afford a bigger defense budget. Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung told the press that "we modernize our armed forces when the economic conditions allow, and that is normal." He also stressed that "Vietnam has a long coast and large maritime zone, which requires protection. Therefore, armed forces modernization is not a matter of contingency or arms race."³⁶

Arm purchase, therefore, is a part of a bigger defense policy. Regional and international cooperation will also be the focus of Vietnamese defense establishment. Indeed, the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) has introduced the term of defense diplomacy to describe its recent efforts at expanding its external relations. The White Paper said: "Defense cooperation is one of the most important factors for maintaining peace and stability in the region and the world as well, and it is also an important factor for achieving Vietnam's defense goals. Therefore, Vietnam advocates expanding defense diplomacy and actively participating in defense and security cooperation in the regional and international community."³⁷ The range of cooperative activities is wide to include exchanging visits, sharing information (even intelligence) and experience,

³⁵ Robert Karniol, "Vietnam's Military Buying Spree: Too Much, Too Soon?" *The Straits Times* website, January 4, 2010. See also "A year-end review of Vietnam's military," "Vietnam modernizing military for self-defense, says general," and "President Nguyen Minh Triet on Naval Modernization," on *VietnamNet* December 22, 2009.

³⁶ *Vnexpress.net* on December 8, 2010. Foreign observers, however, suggest that the acquisition of some sophisticated platform or system does not necessarily translate into an effective capability and that the recent military buying spree is unlikely problem-free. See Robert Karniol, "Vietnam's Military Buying Spree: Too Much, Too Soon?"

³⁷ *White Paper*, pp. 17–18: Vietnam has so far established official defense relations with 65 countries, including major powers in the world; and set up its defense attaché offices in 31 countries. Forty-two countries have opened their defense attaché offices in Vietnam.

observing military exercises, expanding cooperation in training and education, coping with non-traditional issues, etc.³⁸

On the bilateral level, Vietnam promotes defense cooperation “with all countries,”³⁹ especially with neighboring ones, that for most of the cases have territorial disputes with it and with major powers including the US, Russia, Japan, India, and France. On the multilateral level, Vietnam armed forces will work closely with other ASEAN member countries in the effort to build the ASEAN Political-Security Community and proactively participates in the ASEAN Defense Minister Meetings (ADMM) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) frameworks.⁴⁰ In addition, the armed forces are making preparations for UN Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) participation.

These activities are note worthy, because it not only demonstrates that the Vietnamese armed forces are not only more exposed but also takes a more proactive stand with regard to developing external relations. It also shows that the defense policy is increasingly in line with the overall foreign policy of greater regional and international cooperation. As a result, it facilitates greater cooperation and coordination between the military establishment and other ministries inside Vietnam including MOFA, thus overcoming several foreign relations short-comings which have mostly been related to the lack of consensus in world views, a good combination between cooperation and struggle, and a close coordination between and among national defense, security and foreign affairs sectors to effectively design and manage foreign relations of Vietnam.⁴¹

³⁸ For the records of Vietnam's armed forces international cooperation, see, Carl Thayer, “Vietnam's Foreign Relations: The Strategic Defense Dimension,” paper presented at the Fourth Euro-Viet Conference, (October 2008).

³⁹ *White Paper*, pp. 17–18. Vietnam has so far established official defense relations with 65 countries, including major powers in the world; and set up its defense attaché offices in 31 countries.

⁴⁰ The fourth ADMM was held in Hanoi in May 2010 where Vietnam took the lead to initiate the ADMM+8 format for meetings of ASEAN defense ministers and their counterpart from Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russia and the United States of America. The inaugural ADMM-Plus meeting will be held in Vietnam in October 2010.

⁴¹ The CPV, Documents of the 9th Plenum, (January 2004), p. 59. These short-comings have been reiterated in the Xth CPV National Congress Documents.