

IDENTIFYING SECURITY CHALLENGES TO VIETNAM: HANOI'S NEW APPROACH TO NATIONAL SECURITY, AND IMPLICATIONS TO DEFENCE AND FOREIGN POLICIES

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Introduction

In the post Cold-War era, relations among major powers have been improved, thus enabling states 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.¹ This, as a result, helps provide new perspectives on fundamental questions related to national security and strategy.

National security, according to established International Relations theoretical approaches, relate to the survival of states existing in the anarchical environment of international politics that allow continuous wars and conflicts. As it has been argued, the nature of international

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¹ 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.

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 national leaders in the context in which fundamental economic and political changes always create new forces challenging the ruling regimes.²

Vietnam since 1986, is not an exception. The way 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 defence 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." In the context of late 1980s when the country faced with severe economic crisis as and 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

² 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.

makers in Vietnam laid a greater emphasis 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: "With a strong economy, sufficient national defence 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."³ From this perception, greater importance was given to the expansion of foreign relations as the necessary condition for overcoming political isolation and economic blockade for building "a strong economy," which integrated into the regional and international markets on the basis of new division of labour.⁴ 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

³ Tran Quang Co, "The post-Cold War World and Asia-Pacific Region," (The gioi va chau A - Thai Binh Duong sau Chien tranh lanh), *IIR International Studies Review*, (*Tap chi Nghien cuu quoc te*) (December 1992), p. 7.

⁴ The theme of Vietnam participating in the international division of labour 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.

bigger role in ensuring national security and supporting economic development of Vietnam.⁵

Many now believed that the Resolution also introduced a new perception of security in 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."⁶ 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."⁷ 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."⁸

⁵ Nguyen Vu Tung, "Vietnam's New Concept of Security," pp. 409-410.

⁶ Text of the 13th Politburo Resolution, May 1988, p. 17.

⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 3-4.

⁸ *Ibid*, Nguyen Co Thach's Interview. Ogawasara 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 Ogawasara Takauki, "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).

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 economically lagging behind other countries, (ii) deviation from socialist orientation, (iii) corruption, red tape, and inefficient bureaucracy, and (iv) peaceful evolution by hostile forces.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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 development backwardness will

⁹ See also The CPV, *Documents of the IXth National Congress*, p. 15. Nguyen Vu Tung, “Vietnam's New Concept of Security,” p. 420.

¹⁰ 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, *Documents of the VIII CPV Congress*, (Van kien dai hoi VIII Dang Cong san Viet nam) (Hanoi: National Politics Publishing House, 1996), p. 79.

reduce people's belief, cause social problems, and inevitably lead to threats of security, public order, and even regime survival.”¹¹

This threat perception remains unchanged after the events of September 11, 2001. The 9th CPV Central Committee Resolution of January 2004 provided the following official analysis of world situation:

“After September 11, 2001, the world situation became very complicated. “Terrorist” and “anti-terrorist” activities became salient feature 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 policies of imposition, intervention, and armed aggression etc. Yet, peace, cooperation, and development remain in the world mainstream.”¹²

The sources of concern, according to the same document, lie in “the low level of productivity, quality, efficiency, and competitiveness of the economy; the gravity of salient social problems including corruption, degradation of morality and life-style; increased activities of ‘peaceful evolution’ and pressures on ‘democracy’, ‘human rights’, ethnic, religious issues by hostile forces that are giving a helping hand to reactionary and politically opportunistic forces operating in Vietnam.” While considering them as “hidden and increasing threats that create no-small obstacles to the course of industrialization and modernization of Vietnam and threaten the country's political stability,”¹³ it is clear that the CPV sees the threats from the domestic perspective: the threat to national

¹¹ Vu Khoan, “Security, Development, and Influence in Foreign Relations,” (An ninh, Phat trien va Anh huong trong Quan he Quoc te) in MOFA, *Integrating into the World and Preserving Our Characteristics*, pp. 209-210.

¹² “Politburo Report at the CPV 9th Central Committee Plenum (IXth Tenure),” p. 13.

¹³ *Ibid*, p.15.

security seems to be of lesser concern than that to political stability, i.e. the regime. The Political Report at the 9th CPV National Congress reads: “To defend the socialist motherland 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.”¹⁴

The 10th CPV National Congress in 2006 continued the familiar threat analyses. The political report stressed the following threats to Vietnam:

- Economically lagging further 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 waste.
- Deviation from socialist orientations in economic and social policies and lesser vigilance against “peaceful evolution.”
- Hostile forces continue to harbour the scheme of peaceful evolution to cause unrest, instability and to change the political regime in Vietnam under the pretext of democracy and human rights.¹⁵

It, therefore, seems that Vietnam has adopted a 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 help 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 Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam recalled in 1995.¹⁶

In the implementation of such a foreign policy, Vietnam sought to end the Cambodia issue, broaden relations with all countries, particularly the neighboring countries and big powers, and especially develop trade links and attract foreign investments. 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 region and the world.

Only in the context of the leadership’s new world outlook and the expansion of Vietnam’s foreign relations, 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, did Hanoi increasingly feel 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 William 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.”¹⁷

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ Michael C. William, *Vietnam at the Crossroad*, (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1992), p. 60.

¹⁴ The CPV, *The IXth National Congress Documents*, p. 117.

¹⁵ The CPV, *The Xth National Congress Documents*, p. 125.

Diplomacy is the First Line of Defence: The Continued Strategy

In preparation for the next CPV Congress and in the context of the ongoing 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,

- Economically lagging further behind many countries in the region and in the world still exists,

- Hostile forces 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 to and threatening sustainable development and stability in Vietnam.

The White Paper on National Defence by the Ministry of National Defence - 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 lagging further behind due to insufficient resilience while coping with the serious impact of the global financial crisis and economic recession. Though 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, 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 transnational crimes, terrorism, illegal migration and immigration; environmental degradation, climate change, and epidemics continue to beset Vietnam."¹⁸

We can see that in addition to threat 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 number and seriousness of cases. Activities related to fighting terrorism, transnational crimes, tackling environmental issues, and combating infectious diseases are in fact receiving higher attention from, and concerted efforts by a wider collectivity of states.¹⁹ In other words, non-traditional security issues are becoming a new rationale for more international cooperation:

¹⁸ *National Defence 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.

¹⁹ 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.

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 international 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.²⁰

Territorial disputes are increasingly become salient in foreign relations of Vietnam. To be more specific, territorial disputes between Vietnam and Brunei, the Philippines, and Malaysia and between Vietnam and China over the Spratly Islands and those between Vietnam and China over the Paracel Islands are the remaining ones with remote possibility for acceptable solutions in foreseeable future.

In this connection, the implications to foreign and defence policies can be multiple. In the first place, territorial disputes can arouse nationalism and hostile feelings toward other countries, parties to the disputes. Secondly, they 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. Last but not least, they can do harm to efforts at confidence-building, give rise to

²⁰ 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 Defence Dimension," paper presented at the Fourth Euro-Viet Conference, (October 2008).

competitive strategies to develop the disputed areas especially those believed to possess rich natural resources, and renew the security dilemma in the region, thus negatively affecting the general trend toward regional and international cooperation.

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

In the first place, the present foreign policy still attaches great importance to efforts of peaceful and stable external environment. The 9th CPV Congress stressed that Vietnam would continue foreign policy characterised by openness, multilateralisation and diversification of international relations, proactive integration into the world and participating in the process of regional and international cooperation.²¹ 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 "a peaceful environment and favorable conditions for reforms."²² This principle has been reflected in the defence policy. The National Defence White Paper also said: "Vietnam always regards the maintenance of peaceful and stable environment for socio-economic development, industrialization and modernization, building the socialism-oriented market economy the top national interest, and the consistent goal of its national defence policy."²³ 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

²¹ The CPV, *The Xth National Congress Documents*, p.125.

²² The CPV, *The Xth National Congress Documents*, p.125.

²³ *White Paper*, p. 11.

sovereignty in land and at sea through peaceful means on the basis of international laws.”²⁴ In other words, diplomacy continues to be the first line of defence. Deputy Defence 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 defence is consistently trying to solve the dispute through peaceful means while resolutely defending sovereignty and territorial integrity on the basis of international laws and forging greater friendship and understanding between Vietnam and neighbour countries including those concerned with the South China Sea.”²⁵

Secondly and related to the above-mentioned point, with country parties to the territorial disputes, Vietnam is enjoying an overall good relations. Sino-Vietnamese relations are developing in political, security, defence, and economic, social fields. After the two countries normalized relations in 1991, China and Vietnam have following the relationship along the line of “good friends, good comrades, good partners, and good neighbours.” In June 2008, the two countries elevated the bilateral relation to “comprehensive strategic co-operative partnership.”²⁶

Territorial disputes, other than Spratleys 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 2001.²⁷ 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 Department 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, 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 become stable gradually.”²⁸ 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 two countries would be solved by means of negotiation, 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 countries is unthinkable, many in Vietnam believe that China is too powerful to engage in an open armed conflict. Vietnam therefore opts to rely on international laws (based on the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Seas) and regional norms (based on the COC signed between China and ASEAN in 2001) while adhering to the core principles non-recourse to threat or use of force, no first use of force, and self-restraint. The White Paper stressed: “Vietnam is always ready to negotiate with all parties

²⁴ *White Paper*, p. 12.

²⁵ *VietnamNet*, December 8, 2009.

²⁶ 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).

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ *VietNamNet Bridge* on January 1, 2010.

concerned to find peaceful solutions to those disputes in conformity with 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.”²⁹ In an interview in December 2009, Deputy Defence Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh stated: “The complicated situation in the South China Sea is a matter of concern for Vietnamese national defence. Yet, I think that this complicatedness will not lead to military conflict.” He further explained: in the first place, the general trend in the region and the world does not favour any armed conflict, for it would harm not only the parties to the conflict but also other countries; conflicts harm 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.³⁰

In addition, 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 effective occupations in the area, preventing the issues from being internationalized, and shoring up nationalism. But on the other hand, in the foreseeable future, the likelihood that China will use force to occupy the Spratlys is low, for the following reasons: (i) China

²⁹ *White Paper*, p. 12. *The White Paper* (pp. 11- 12) also said that Vietnam advocates against first use of force in international relations.

³⁰ *VietnamNet*, December 8, 2009.

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 into consideration reactions of ASEAN, Japan, and the United States before deciding to radically change the status quo.³¹ 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: Defence 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 defence policies introduced by Hanoi since the reform started in 1986. The National Defence White Paper of 2009 stated: “Proactively preventing and repulsing the dangers of wars are among essential tasks of Vietnam’s national defence in peacetime in order to realize the optimal national defence strategy of protecting its sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and other national interests without resorting to war. Vietnam advocates implementing the national defence strategy through a spectrum of political, economic, diplomatic, socio-cultural and military activities aimed at eradicating the causes of armed conflicts and wars.”³²

³¹ Interviews of the authors with policy makers in Hanoi. According to *VietNamNet Bridge* on January 1, 2010, Bridge 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.

³² *White Paper*, p. 13.

The Defence Budget of Vietnam

(Billion VND)

	2005	2006	2007	2008
GDP	839,211	973,791	1,143,442	1,490,000
Defence budget	16,278	20,577	28,922	27,024
Share in GDP	1.872%	2.194%	2.529%	1.813%

(Source: *National Defence White Paper*, p. 29)

So what to make of the Vietnam's calls for modernizing its armed forces and its recent plans to buy sophisticated weapon systems?³³ With the priority of ensuring a peaceful and stable external environment for economic development and the principles of renouncing non-resort threat or use of force while multilateralizing and diversifying foreign relations and seeking solutions to disputes through the means of negotiation, Vietnam continues to adopt the approach of developing "a strong economy, sufficient national defence capability, and expanded international relations." The growth of the economy has allowed Vietnam to afford a bigger defence 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.

³³ 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.

Therefore, armed forces modernization is not a matter of contingency or arms race."³⁴

Arm purchase, therefore, is a part of a bigger defence policy. Regional and international cooperation will also be the focus of Vietnamese defence establishment. Indeed, the Vietnamese People's Army (VPA) has introduced the term of *defence diplomacy* to describe its recent efforts at expanding its external relations. The White Paper said: "Defence 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 defence goals. Therefore, Vietnam advocates expanding defence diplomacy and actively participating in defence and security cooperation in the regional and international community."³⁵ The range of cooperative activities is wide to include exchanging visits, sharing information (even intelligence) and experience, observing military exercises, expanding cooperation in training and education, coping with non-traditional issues, etc.³⁶

On the bilateral level, Vietnam promotes defence cooperation "with all countries,"³⁷ especially with neighbours, that for most of the cases have

³⁴ *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?"

³⁵ *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.

³⁶ For the records of Vietnam's armed forces international cooperation, see, Carl Thayer, "Vietnam's Foreign Relations: The Strategic Defence Dimension," paper presented at the Fourth Euro-Viet Conference, (October 2008).

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.

territorial disputes with it and with major powers including the US, Russia, Japan, India, and France. On the multilateral level, Vietnamese armed forces will work closely with other ASEAN member countries in an effort to build the ASEAN Political-Security Community and proactively participates in the ASEAN Defence Minister Meetings (ADMM) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) frameworks. In addition, the armed forces are making preparations for UN Peacekeeping Operations (PKO).

These activities are note worthy, because it not only demonstrates that the VPA not only is more exposed but also takes a more proactive stand with regard to developing external relations. It also shows that the defence 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 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), thus overcoming several foreign relations shortcomings 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 defence, security and foreign affairs sectors to effectively design and manage foreign relations of Vietnam.³⁸

³⁸ The CPV, *Documents of the 9th Plenum*, (January 2004), p. 59. These shortcomings have been reiterated in the 10th CPV National Congress Documents.