

ON THE DEEPENING OF VIETNAM'S FOREIGN RELATIONS

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One of the main directions set out by the 10th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam was “to deepen, stabilize and solidify established international ties.”¹ Accordingly, in the last few years, Vietnam has paid much attention to the enhancement of relations with key partners, viewed as important players in regarding the country’s security and development in the following directions: (i) to extend and deepen relations with the neighboring countries; (ii) to take relations with a number of countries to a higher level such as “strategic partnership” and “comprehensive strategic partnership”; (iii) to reinforce established strategic partnerships.²

The policy implementation in the past years and the demands in the coming time require us to define the contents of what have been considered “deep relationships” and the standards to measure the “depth” of those international partnerships. Unlike the “width”, the “depth” of a relation is difficult to measure. Moreover, such a measurement greatly depends on the subjective perception, and even on the interests of those

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¹ Documents of the Tenth National Party Congress, National Political Publishing House, 2006, p.112.

² In this group, attention should be paid to the strategic partnership with Russia; relationship with Singapore may be seen as a kind of strategic partnership.

involved in the policy-making process. As such, understanding and reaching agreements on measurement standards of the depth of relations are varied and ever changing. Thus, a common theoretical formula is needed to provide policy-makers with more specific tools to be used to analyze and determine relations in a given setting.

This article looks at some aspects of the concept of “deepening relations,” including its connotations and criteria to evaluate the depth of relationships. On that basis, the authors hope to bring home a better understanding and concurrence on the approach to foreign relations set out by the 10th National Congress. In addition, we boldly put forth some measurement standards that could identify the depth of Vietnam’s foreign relations as we are integrating further into the region and the rest of the world.

Aspects of the depth of foreign relations

Semantically, the depth of foreign relations implies several contrasts. “Depth” is used to determine the extent, in contrast to the shallowness of relations. It also refers to the development of relations in narrowed and specialized fields, as in contrast to the extension of relations at width in various areas. Thus, “depth” might indicate “quality”, not the “quantity” of relations, with focus more on the substance than mere formality.

On that account, it can be said that the deepening of relations mostly relates to the promotion of a given relationship in the “quality over quantity” principle, focusing on “intensive” rather than “extensive” aspects and being inclined towards stability and sustainability contrary to fluctuality and fragility of foreign relations.

The abovementioned points might be agreed easily in principle and abstract. However, further discussion is needed for some specific and

“technical” questions. They include: How long must the relationship be so as to be considered deep and stable? What are the necessary and sufficient conditions to establish a deep relationship? What are the links between the depth and the width of a relationship? What does a developing model for a deep relation look like? What are the characteristics of a relation progressing in depth?

In theory, these matters can be approached in the discussions on international cooperation, especially on conditions for sustainable international cooperation. From this perspective, international cooperation must entail two factors: Firstly, the interests of participants; and secondly, the cooperative institutions that participants have established to manage the relationship between and among them. Hence, the depth of a cooperative relation must be based on stability and profoundness of these two factors. Specifically, the depth of relations depends on:

- The stability of shared interests;
- The stability of jointly established or participated institutions;
- The stability of commonly appreciated and established values and identities, in close connection with specific interests and institutions.

Shared interests and the intensity of interwoven interests

Interests are the starting point for cooperation and conflicts in international affairs, meaning that cooperation comes from shared interests between international actors and that conflicts of interest are the cause of disagreement and disputes. In this view, it can be presumed that the closer the interests, the deeper a relation would be. Vice versa, without common interests, that relation cannot be developed and maintained in long-term. As a result, it is best for two countries to have

parallel, “mutually dependent” and “entwined” interests, to the point where one side cannot be detached nor replaced by another. At this point, relations between them can be considered deep and stable. That is to say, relations that do not serve a country’s interests cannot be deepened nor be called profound while relations meeting the highest national interests should be qualified to enjoy priority and to develop “in depth.”

A country’s national interests entail vital interests and development interests. Ensuring security, development and a higher international standing are the objectives of foreign policy.³ Bringing external relations to a “deep level” must serve Vietnam’s national interests. As we integrate further in the region and the world, having deeper relations means having better conditions for protection of our independence, sovereignty; maintaining peace with the world, stability and order; providing the people with security; ensuring economic security and space for development; preserving and enhancing cultural characteristics; and increasing national standing in the international arena. In other words, the goals of bringing foreign relations to a “deep level” is to better realize our vital and development interests, to enhance Vietnam’s ability to protect and expand its interests while minimize threats to our interests and/or the space or chances to amplify the capacity to enhance our national interests. As such, bringing foreign relations to a “deep level” must: (i) bring about positive and long-term effects to the process of intensifying our country’s comprehensive power, (ii) create a spill-over effects on other areas of relations and the country’s external relations in general, and (iii) secure a higher national standing in the region and the

³ Vu Khoan, “*Development, security and impact in diplomatic activities*”, *Vietnam’s foreign policy*, Collection of essays in International Relation Study on Vietnam’s foreign policy, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, The World Publishing House, Hanoi, 2007.

world. Similarly, in order to limit threats to our national interests, bring our foreign relations to a “deep level” is to prevent hostile forces from harming our interests, and if they have a plan to do havoc to our interest, they will find it difficult to do so, because such actions go counter to their own interests or the interests of their partners.

Therefore, the fundamental characteristics of the depth of a relationship are durability and stability. However, in international affairs, these concepts are relative. The “durability” of relations with a partner must have the following aspects: (i) the relation lasts long enough for us to “invest” in, consolidate and develop it; and we will not revise the existing policies; (ii) the relationship becomes an important part of the country’s comprehensive external strategy. Such a partnership will last long if the two sides continue to share long term common interests.

Only in the following cases are the common interests long-lasting. Firstly, there is a natural common interest and the factors causing conflict of interests are non-existent. This is the case where countries share a common set of policy goals and values while having no major disputes and differences. Secondly, the common interests are developed and amplified through interactions. In these cases, naturally shared interests are unlikely and cannot long last. On the other hand, shared interest out of interactions entails difficult process and requires sensible determination from both sides and much more time, especially as the interactions would lead to the formation of a common “identity”. Also, “stability” should be understood such that: (i) the relation has not been interrupted nor suspended for a long time; (ii) possible confrontation has no considerable impact on the relation and foreign relations in general. From the view of interests, the relation would be more stable if losses due to “instability” are bigger than the cost involved in maintaining and

enhancing the stability of that relation. In other words, to strengthen the stability of relations, it is necessary to increase the “losses” of instability to a certain point in which both sides must frequently invest in order to maintain a stable relation.

In a nutshell, from the perspective of national interests, the “depth” of foreign relations depends on the level of entwined interests. The reason is that entwined interests would: (i) increase “losses” if relations are broken off, (ii) decrease the risk of a partner transforming himself into a hostile player, thus lessening challenges against our national interests; (iii) enhance the foundation of stable and long lasting relations, especially the trust and the level of identity harmonization. In other words, the interest entwinement creates the depth and sustainability of relations.

If we view the level of interest entwinement as the standard to measure the “depth” of foreign relations and use it to study the relations between Vietnam and its key partners, there is a linkage: the greater, more essential and long-lasting the level of interest entwinement is, the “deeper” the relations will be and vice versa.

In political and security matters, interest entwinement is shown in the following aspects: (i) “the level of common interest”, the place of each country in their respective strategies; (ii) the level of commitments of each party to the shared interest, in legal binding documents; (iii) the level of presence and effectiveness of cooperative mechanisms in ensuring the realization of the commitments; and in advancing “these common interests” in a long-term fashion. The permanent presence and high-level threats and challenges can often be found in the analysis of common and entwined security interests.

Similarly, in economic matter, interest entwinement is measured by the following standards: (i) the “degree” of common economic interests; (ii) the “tightness” of binding commitments and (iii) the “effectiveness” of cooperative mechanisms, including the “effectiveness” of domestic mechanisms in promoting entwined interests, making them more essential and long-lasting in each country’s internal contexts.

The most obvious expressions of shared economic interests are shown in the following: (i) the two sides’ cooperation in big programs and projects in important areas and development strategy of each other, (ii) the level of interdependence regarding trade and economics, particularly strategic products directly linking to development and security of the two sides; and more importantly, the level of economic complementariness based on comparative advantages of each side. In other words, the level at which “one party could not be without the other” will define the “depth” of the relations to the extent that it could be an “anchor” holding them back in case certain areas are problematic.

In assessing the “depth” of relations through the level of interest entwinement, it can be argued that economic interest is the most important factor because of the following reasons: (i) economic development is the highest and ultimate target pursued by every nation, (ii) sharing common economic interests is a motivation and foundation for sharing interests in other areas, (iii) economic interest entwinement is “the most stable” field and “hard to change” overnight. We need to change our thinking from “give-and-take” or “free-riding” mindset to focusing more on other nations’ interests, satisfying the legitimate aspirations of other countries in the mutual beneficial and “win - win” spirit.

The sustainability of cooperative mechanisms

The national interests approach, however, needs more discussion because the very concepts of interests, including both vital and developmental interests, are debatable, depending on given circumstances, especially on domestic political structures in various states of affairs, a nation (and its government) can introduce different definitions regarding “national interests”. Realists make sense when they assume that the concepts of shared national interests and as consequence the patterns of alliance and hostility are changeable. When World War II was over, the alliance between the Allies and the Soviet Union was broken because their common interests of defeating Fascism no longer existed. Similarly, new governments usually calculate and work out new foreign policies based on the reassessment of its “perceived” national interests and adjust their relations approaches towards other countries. In practice, therefore, nations might formulate their policies out of short-term interests, without being mindful of stable and long-term relations.

The above part discussed the defining of common interests and how to create interest entwinement to lay a foundation for deep and stable relations. This section deals with some “technical” measures to consolidate the relations by putting in place mechanisms/institutions for managing cooperative relations. The “depth” of foreign relations can not be separated from the “durability” of the institutions for managing these relations. Normally, a relation is formed through official bindings (legal or political documents) and maintained through cooperation-managing mechanisms created by the two sides. Naturally, these mechanisms cannot come into operation if participants find no interests in cooperation. However, the existence of some cooperative mechanisms may promote the cooperation thanks to their following advantages:

- Maintaining contacts among all the parties: those contacts include working relations at the individual level (specialists, officials directly in charge of the relation), the institutional level (ministries, sectors and companies) and the national level (heads of the state, senior officials in charge of the relation). This is the first ground for building cooperative relations because ultimately, individuals and departments are the fundamental forces to maintain national relations. Besides, those are the actors that design cooperative projects and deal with obstacles to cooperation. Therefore the “depth” and “durability” of relations could be measured by: (i) the “depth” and “durability” of working relations between individuals and institutions involved in the cooperative relations, (ii) at a higher level, it is the confidence/trust-building process between all sides in cooperative relations. Ultimately, the relations in depth should be measured by the level of trust among the actors taking part in cooperation.

- Building commonalities in policy-making mechanisms: A sound cooperation depends on the smooth operation of policy-making mechanisms of each country and the countries’ commonalities in policy-making mechanisms. So if policy-making processes among countries (value system, procedures, process...) are conflicting, “technical” problems could emerge and stand in the way of bringing cooperative relations into depth. The uniformity of national policy-making mechanism is very useful in this case. Nowadays, the model of joint commissions and joint cabinet meetings could be the good ways to deepen and manage the deepening relationship.

- Improving cooperative channels: Cooperative mechanisms frequently result from cooperation. In other words, cooperation is always accompanied by cooperative mechanism. Here, we can rely on the neo-

institutionalist logics of international cooperation: a sound cooperative mechanism is helpful to cooperation, creating the momentum for stronger cooperation. Moreover, the rationale of mechanism shows that creating new mechanisms is always more difficult and expensive than upgrading or operating the old ones. Therefore, the existing mechanisms (including the ones operating without effectiveness) may also be the institutional ground for “restarting” cooperative relations. The best situation is to have good cooperation with appropriate mechanisms.

In this situation, the “depth” of cooperation could be measured by: (i) the vitality of cooperative mechanism, the long existence of cooperative mechanism, (ii) the levels of cooperative structures (rules, organizational structure) as well as (iii) the stability of the rules of conduct, principles of operation (written and unwritten) of these mechanisms, (iv) conflict-solving and crisis-managing mechanisms to reconcile the interests which comprehensively manifest through (v) the mutual trust and commitments between the two sides to following and upgrading the mechanisms. Even in the case of changing the governments and officials, the relations are still maintained. In other words, individual factor is less important regarding cooperative channels (although it is better if individual and institutional factors are both at work). ASEAN is increasingly developing the mechanisms of cooperation and moving towards building an ASEAN Community based on three pillars, namely the Security Community, the Economic Community and the Socio-Cultural Community; European countries have built the European Community and later the European Union. These are examples on building relations in “depth” by improving the mechanisms among the members.

Thus, a loose institution shows that the relations are not in depth and remain hard to be deepened. In contrast, a tight institution creates

favorable conditions for the relations to go into depth with specific products, namely tight ruling-system and stable standards of norms of conduct.

The durability of identity and values

Interest and institutional factors and linkages between them as introduced above are good conditions to nurture cooperative relations based on the common on identity and values. The constructivists believe that the foundation for international cooperation is the perception and the understanding of common values and identity of the participants. In other words, the common identity and values would create foundation for the cooperation. Thus, the bigger the common identity and values are, the deeper, more stable and more sustainable the cooperation is.

Therefore, the “depth” of relations also depends on the understanding, sharing and consolidation of the common values and identity, all are involved in the following aspects:

- Fostering greater awareness of common identity and values among the elites: this could directly affect and beef up cooperative mechanisms which ensure the consolidation of common values and identity through rules and stable norms while facilitating the harmonization of interests of all participants in the cooperation.

- Intensifying public understanding of common identity and values: sharing of values and mutual understanding at the public level would facilitate the work at higher levels, upholding the commonality on religions, culture, languages and ideology, etc which are of greater and more stable values. This entails a higher level of people’s contacts, cross-border movement of goods, capital and labor, thus creating a greater state of economic interdependence. Cooperation between Britain and the

US and that between the US and Canada are examples of this tendency. At a higher level, this could lead to legal adjustments in each country to support the process. The EU objectives of common sovereignty, borders and single currency, and above all, a common identity are striking evidences of the relations in depth.

The standards to value the “depth” and “durability” of relations in this respect is the nurturing and development of the so called “we-feeling” in the people’s consciousness and thoughts as well as those of the elites in society. Obviously, these must be nurtured because of interests for majority and protected by strong institutional frameworks. In other words, the combined effects of the durability of interests, institutions and values will ensure the strength and the depth of cooperative relations. At this point, a relation will not be “thin” or “fragile” because it has been deepened.

Conditions for building relations in depth

For the depth of a relation to be materialized, we may need the following conditions:

Developing the “width” of relations and addressing the relation between “quality” and “quantity”

Developing relations in depth must be based on a given level of the “width”. This is a dialectical relation between quality and quantity: it requires a given condition for the development of quantity to create a new quality. In addition, the logic of international cooperation suggests that a sound cooperation would lead to new cooperation in scope and area. So, for relations to be deep, we must ensure the development in width in three aspects, namely, interests, institutions and values.

International relation is “two-way street”. In recent years, thanks to our internal and external achievements, our country has gained a new position in the world. Therefore our partners need us and agree to bring relations into depth. With the width as pre-conditions, we can find out “key areas” as well as most effective institutions/mechanisms and most of all trust-worthy partners so as to deepen the widened relations. Therefore, development in depth does not mean putting an end to the development in width. Rather, the width must complement the depth.

Confidence building

To bring relations into depth, nations need to have a high “sense of confidence”. Without confidence and trust, the relations can not be developed into depth. Without confidence (to a given extent), there is no substantial cooperation and hardly can we address sensitive matters. Nowadays, when the trend of international cooperation is increasingly prominent and there are great demands for cooperation among nations, bolstering confidence becomes even more important. If building confidence is a condition to form and promote cooperation, high level of trust is needed to bring relations into depth.

The relation between trust/confidence and cooperation could be simply described in the table below:

	High level of confidence	Low level of confidence
More cooperation	1. Good friend/reliable partner	2. Bad friend/temporary partner
Less cooperation	3. Good partner/potential friend	4. Bad partner/enemy

Therefore we need to define tools that can be use to assess the high level of confidence.⁴ Within 4 levels of confidence above, level 1 is for assessing the development in depth of relations.

- Degree 1: (High sense of confidence) we believe that partners always act consistently matching words with deeds. The reasons for confidence: (i) it is verified in reality (ii) there are institutions binding the partner to act in such a pattern of behavior.

- Degree 2: (Less confidence) we believe that the partner sometimes acts consistently matching words with deeds. The reasons for confidence: (i) it is sometimes evidenced in reality and (ii) there may be internal and external factors forcing the partner to act in such a way.

- Degree 3: (Suspicion) we do not believe that the partner always acts consistently, his words do not match with deeds, especially in matters directly involving their own security and development. The reasons for suspicion: (i) the reality shows that and (ii) there are no institutions forcing the partner to act consistently or there are some existing institutions, the violations of which are not criticized or strictly punished.

- Degree 4: (deep suspicion) we believe that the partner always acts inconsistently, his words do not match with deeds, and he cheats. The reason for suspicion: (i) the reality shows that and (ii) there are no institutions forcing the partner to act consistently.

The measures of building confidence are related to creating common interests, the mechanisms of supplying information and

⁴ Dang Dinh Quy and Nguyen Vu Tung, “Trust in international relations and strategic orientation in building trust in Vietnam’s foreign relations”, *International Studies*, Vol. 76, No. 1, March 2009.

verifying behavior, thus ensuring the “matching words with deeds”, and avoiding “speaking much without doing anything”. After all, bridging the distance between words and deeds means making it easier for us to predict behaviors of a nation.⁵ Therefore, if measures and mechanisms of building confidence are operated well, there will be favorable conditions for the relations to go into depth. Also, this is a mutually supportive process: the depth of a relation will increase the trust.

Capacity to manage relations in depth

A relation in depth needs a given national strength and international standing, a given level of development, as well as well-functioning institutions to ensure effective implementation of all commitments. This is a high demand for us because we are now in the period of comprehensive international integration that requires all the ministries and sectors from central to local levels, from business circles to non-governmental organizations to meet the organizational and professional requirements regarding organizing work and capability building. The foreign service alone cannot bring about the depth of relations. Instead, the combination of all diplomatic activities, namely political-security diplomacy, economic diplomacy and cultural diplomacy by the State, the people and businesses is greatly needed. These actors should act with specifically-defined functions and at the same time cooperate with one another in a flexible manner to ensure maximum outcome in the conduct of foreign affairs in the direction of building greater confidence, interweaving various interests, nurturing and consolidating shared identities and values.

⁵ See more in Dang Dinh Quy and Nguyen Vu Tung, *ibid.*

In short, for a policy to be carried out fruitfully, we must (i) have an effective policy-making apparatus at national level, which can clearly define interests, priorities and coordinate all foreign relations at national level, (ii) build a good mechanism of coordination, because the foreign relations have become increasingly comprehensive with greater interdisciplinary and interagency characteristics, and (iii) train foreign affairs staffs who are professionally qualified with sound knowledge of international politics, laws, economics, and foreign languages.

The model of deepening relations

Models of partnership are very common in contemporary international relations which show the increase in international cooperation. A partnership requires that:

- The model must be built on the foundation of a relationship that has fairly developed; this relationship has got out of strains and are developing comprehensively. Partnership can be developed from an existing alliance which is trying to vitalize itself. In other words, partnership is designe to aim for a relationship higher than general international cooperation.

- The model needs to be institutionalized through specific documents, clearly stipulated areas and scopes of cooperation. Normally, an agreement on partnership must be adopted by political leaders, thus increasing the legitimacy of the partnership. It means that the model must be based on a good foundation of political willingness and institutional frameworks.

- The model must be evidenced in specific projects in which all the goals, timetable of operations, the level of participation of related parties and the assessment of common projects must be defined clearly. It means

that the model must be managed effectively to ensure positive results meet the expectations of the parties concerned, ensuring a “win - win” situation and avoiding “free-riding.” A good management of a partnership must guarantee the practicality and feasibility of specific projects, at the same time focus on the durability of the relationship and the openness of the partnership model (not to be conditioned by ultimate results or by specific forms of deployment).⁶

Thus, partnership model meet requirements for bringing a relation into depth. Realities have shown that since the Ninth National Party Congress, the foreign relations of Vietnam have strongly developed with the focus on building partnerships with different actors in many news areas.

The Ninth National Party Congress and its Central Committee’s resolutions, especially Resolution No.8 adopted in July 2003 laid the theoretical foundation for our partnership relations through introducing and increasingly modifying the concept of partnership. The introduction of partnership concepts obviously stem from the demand to raise Vietnam’s foreign relations to a higher and substantial level both in width and depth especially regarding the relations that have been developed comprehensively. As former President Tran Duc Luong once said, this was “an upgrading of bilateral relations with neighboring countries, big nations and traditional friends. Moreover, it is a shift in Vietnam’s relations with big countries and international institutions from normalization to deep, stable and long-lasting relations for mutual interests.”⁷

⁶ Nguyen Vu Tung and Hoang Anh Tuan, *Strategic partnership in international relations: from theory to practice*, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, Hanoi, 2006.

⁷ Speech of President Tran Duc Luong delivered at the Congress of the Representatives of the Foreign Relation Party’s Section, *The People Newspaper*, published in 29 Dec, 2005.

Broadly speaking, partnership suggests the willingness for a new form of multi-faced cooperative relations, being suited to actors and to international and domestic situations, in the interests of all sides, thus making the relationship deeper and more durable. Former Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien said: “In such a relationship, all the parties work together to establish a relationship suitable in international situations and ensure benefits for the all sides.”⁸ The ideal case is that partnership is both the outcome of and the driving force for cooperative relations.

One caveat is needed here: in theory and in practice a partnership (even strategic ones) can be open-ended. A partnership may end because it fails to bring positive results or focus shifts. However, the trustful partnerships offered by Vietnam are aimed at maintaining a long-lasting relationship. To that end, Vietnam is working towards partnerships in which the benefits of each party have become too important for the related parties to ignore and as a result, they would make every effort to maintain and protect that partnership.⁹ Former Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien hold the view that attention should be paid to reliable partnership in which “defining common interests, paying a considerable attention to nurturing and bolstering confidence on the basis of friendship, stable, peaceful and long-lasting relationship and mutual interests are organic elements, closely interacting with each other.”¹⁰ A well-known foreign relations expert also held that in relation to partners

⁸ Nguyen Dy Nien, *Ho Chi Minh Thoughts on Diplomacy*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 2002, p. 301.

⁹ Foreign Policy Planning Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Reviewing Foreign Policies and International Relations of Vietnamese Party and State after 20 years of Renewal”, p. 53.

¹⁰ Nguyen Dy Nien, *Ho Chi Minh Thought on Diplomacy*, p. 301.

we should “try to establish equal, stable and long-lasting ties, creating a state of interdependence in terms of interests.”¹¹

If the new and more comprehensive understanding of partners facilitates the development of partnerships, this does not follow that the building of a partnership with a particular player is easy, because of the following reasons:

- *Firstly*, our understanding about foreign relations is still limited. Our Party has asserted that we are “still slow in renewing our thinking regarding a number of international and foreign matters”¹². Especially, in our relationships with some big nations, being slow in renewing thinking has hindered us from gaining an adequate and comprehensive understanding on those actors, leading to inconsistent and inflexible policy.¹³

- *Secondly*, the identification and classification of partners remain unsystematical as the standards of interests and priorities are not clearly defined. While there have been few review and assessment of the existing partnerships, new partnership models are still being proposed.

¹¹ Hong Ha, *About our partners*, Presentation at Scientific Conference with the theme of “Partnership Framework in Foreign Relations of Vietnam: Situation and Prospect” held by Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam in 27 Dec 2005.

¹²Theoretical Council, *Some theoretical and practical issues in 20 years of Renewal*, p.118.

¹³ National Committee for Ideology and Culture, *The study on Resolution No.8 (The Ninth Tenure)*, p. 36. The Ninth Central Committee’s meeting (The Ninth Tenure) said: “Studies on strategy and forecast situation are weak; the agreement in awareness, especially in policy with some big nations is still low; in some cases, we are passive in dealing with situations; the coordination between struggle and cooperation is not really smooth; sometimes, handling the relationship between maintaining internal stability and extending external relations is perplexed”. See more at *Documents of the Ninth Conference of the Ninth Central Committee*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 2004, p. 58-59.

This fact creates difficulties in the process of implementation of the partnership-building process.

- *Thirdly*, we have some weakness in the implementation and management of specific partnerships. The weaknesses are evidenced in the performance of the institutions making and implementing policy at all levels such as doing research, coordinating and executing policy at national, local and individual levels. Regarding the weakness in design and implementation of policy, the Communist Party of Vietnam has pointed out: “The Party’s leadership has some weaknesses in terms of ability, character and intelligence” and working staffs are not up to the new requirements, lacking of political consciousness, expertise and professional knowledge; some behave badly in lifestyle and morality”.¹⁴ Regarding the limitations of mechanisms, the Communist Party of Vietnam believes that: “The mechanisms that coordinate sectors - especially those in the areas of economics, national defense, security and foreign relations; or the ones that coordinate the central and local levels - are not up to the mark, thus negatively affecting the work of foreign affairs.”¹⁵ As the result, the management of a partnership with each foreign actor becomes more difficult because of the diversification and interlocking connections in each specific partnership or those among various different partnerships.

¹⁴ *Report on some theoretical and practical issues in 20 years of Renewal*, p.124-125; “Summing up foreign policies and international relations of Vietnamese Party and State in 20 years of Renewal” of Foreign Policy Department; Ministry of Foreign Affairs also affirmed that: “Staffs doing diplomatic works remain weak in term of politics, specialty and foreign languages, especially lacking of knowledge and experiences on multilateral economic cooperation and in cooperating with developed countries’ markets,” p. 75.

¹⁵ The Communist Party of Vietnam, *Resolution No. 9 (The Ninth Tenure)*, p. 57.

Consequently, although the partnership model is booming, it is by no means smooth-sailing. While asserting that we are “continuing to expand and enhance stable, long-lasting cooperative relations with many countries in the world,”¹⁶ the Communist Party of Vietnam also pointed out that: “The cooperative relations with many countries are not deep and we have not established and made good use of the relations involving common interests and interdependence.”¹⁷

Some hold opinions that international relations of Vietnam have not met the expectations partly because of “our limited capacity” or “Vietnam’s failure to secure high place in policies of other countries, especially in those of big countries.” According to the authors, it is in a way true but still lopsided, especially in the context of the discussion about building partnership, for the following reasons:

- *Firstly*, a partnership is always focussed on concrete projects in some concrete fields. Therefore, the most important part lies in the understanding and building of cooperative areas suited to the parties involved so as to make successful implementation possible. That requires the parties involved to have good grasp of each other’s demands and abilities. That does not require them to embrace cooperative areas which are beyond their reach. According to Hong Ha, there are “big partners and small partners” and when we “establish relations with our partners,

¹⁶ Resolution No. 9 (The Ninth tenure) also said that: “The building of uniform management mechanisms remains slow-moving”. (Documents of Resolution No. 9, p. 59). *Report on some theory and practical issues in 20 years of Renewal*, p.124 and p. 57.

¹⁷ National Committee for Ideology and Culture, *The study on Resolution No. 8 (The Ninth Tenure)*, p. 36. Resolution No. 9 (The Ninth tenure) also said: “The cooperative relations with many countries lack of depth and firmness, sometimes economic and politic relations are not close to each other; in some specific cases those relations may have many weaknesses”. (Documents of Resolution No. 9, p. 59).

we have to take into account common and interests interests, advantages and disadvantages, as well as our abilities and limitations.”¹⁸ This means that the argument over-emphasizing the resources constraints is not totally relevant in the thinking about design and implementation of a partnership. Besides, after 20 years of Renewal, Vietnam’s standing and capability have been developed considerably.¹⁹

- Secondly, Vietnam’s higher position in other countries’ foreign policies does not totally depend on Vietnam’s resources. Rather, it depends on Vietnam’s ability to use the available resources to meet its partners’ needs as well as the process of cooperation during which Vietnam could prove itself to be a trust-worthy partner. This, therefore, highlights the importance of the design and management of partnerships, especially the specific projects. This also shows that the ability and effectiveness of the institutions with qualified staff are very essential. In this connection, our Party has correctly stressed that we lack initiatives and proactiveness.²⁰

The process of the renewal of thought in foreign affairs as well as the construction and perfection of institutions for foreign policy-making and implementing, especially the provision of professional staff for these institutions are long and difficult. As a result, there is still a certain gap between the design and the performance of many partnership-type of relationships.

¹⁸ Hong Ha, *About our partners*, Presentation at Scientific Conference with the theme of “Partnership framework in foreign relations of Vietnam: Situation and Prospect” held by Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam in 27 Dec 2005.

¹⁹ Nguyen Dy Nien, “Grasp chances, overcome difficulties, successfully implement foreign guidelines of the Tenth Party Congress”, *The Communist Journal*, No. 11 (June 2006), p. 5.

²⁰ *Report on some of theoretical and practical issues in 20 years of Renewal*, p.119

This article preliminarily touches upon some important issues on one of the most important directions in Vietnam's foreign policy in a new period of deepening Vietnam's foreign relations. In a nutshell, the question now is related to choosing partners and defining priority areas for cooperation and how to achieve good outcomes. Deepening foreign relations needs to be accompanied with building confidence and participating proactively and responsibly in the existing bilateral and multilateral mechanisms, bearing in mind three aspects of interest, mechanism and value system.

We should also pay attention to the actors that have direct bearings on Vietnam's fundamental and long-term interests, namely big countries and ASEAN states. We then must (i) assess comprehensively the degree of interest entwinements between our country and these partners, so as to advance common interests within the next 5 years in all fields, especially economics, as well as to define guidelines and measures for the realization of partnership relationship; (ii) assess the existing mechanisms (first and foremost the existing strategic partnerships and institutions in and related to the ASEAN Community) so as to enhance their effectiveness with a view to building sustainable rules and norms of conduct, with a view to the establishment of common identity and value system. If necessary, we may put in place new mechanisms, too.

It is easier said than done. Foreign relations are always of reciprocal nature, and our important partners include big powers whose strategic goals are global rather than regional. Therefore, to deepen our relations with those countries, we must be fully conscious of the guidelines of being "proactive and responsible" in the strategy of international relations that has been mapped out by our Party.