


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Decoding Vietnam’s Foreign Policy After the Thirteenth National Party Congress: Process, Continuity, and Adjustment

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Abstract

As the third decade of the twenty-first century begins, Vietnam embarks on a more advanced phase of national development and international integration, with a greater emphasis on foreign policy as part of the country’s overall national defence and development strategy. This informs greater expectations about shifts in Vietnam’s foreign policy perception and discourse in pursuit of national interests and the regime’s legitimacy amidst major domestic and international developments. This article analyses the making, in terms of processes and actors, and the evolution, in terms of themes and directions, of Vietnam’s foreign policy under the Thirteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, which was held in early 2021. The article argues that while embedding continuity with what the country has been pursuing since its renovation process (known as *Doi Moi*) started in the mid-1980s, Vietnam’s foreign policy under the Thirteenth Party Congress is crafted on a broader base of domestic consensus and features new dimensions, implying stronger domestic support for Hanoi’s conduct of foreign affairs and a Vietnamese nation brand with greater visibility and contribution in the regional and global arenas in the coming years.

Keywords: Vietnam; adjustment; consensus; continuity; foreign policy; national interest

Introduction

Following more than three decades of renovation (known as *Doi Moi*), Vietnam’s foreign policy has been accorded increasing importance as it gains widespread recognition as an essential contributing factor to implementing the national defence and development strategy. External relations have significantly contributed to promoting Vietnam’s national security, prosperity, and international prestige, hence bolstering the legitimacy of the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) (Le and Tsvetov 2018: 3). The political report presented at the Thirteenth National Congress of the CPV, which was held from 25 January to 1 February 2021, emphasised the “pioneering role of diplomacy in preserving a peaceful and stable environment, mobilising external resources for national development, and enhancing the nation’s status and prestige” (Communist Party of Vietnam 2021: 164). The Congress also highlighted the need for modern and comprehensive diplomacy in terms of actors, fields, whole-government/whole-nation approach, and capacity of the establishment and personnel in charge of the actual conduct of foreign affairs, in the context of profound changes caused by major domestic and international developments. Correspondingly, while embedding continuity with what the country has been pursuing since *Doi Moi*, Vietnam’s foreign policy under the Thirteenth Party Congress is crafted on a broader base of domestic consensus and features new dimensions in the emphases and priorities.

¹The views expressed are the authors’ own and do not necessarily reflect those of the institutions they work for.

The Consensus-Based and Participatory Process of Foreign Policy Formulation

In Vietnam's political system, the quinquennial National Congress of the ruling CPV is the most important event for officially adopting the country's national defence and development strategy, of which foreign policy forms an integral part. Recent Party Congresses have reflected the increasingly formal institutionalisation of Vietnam's collective policy decision-making, including foreign policy, in terms of actors and processes, on a broader premise of inputs, consultations, and recommendations.

The process of formulating the policy was multi-phased. It began with the work of think-tanks to produce analyses, reviews, and recommendations, at least two years before the Congress was convened. The most instrumental think-tanks involved in the early stages of policy formulation were the Vietnam Academy for Social Sciences and Humanities and the Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, which are directly affiliated with the Government and the Central Committee of the CPV, respectively. Other think-tanks affiliated with relevant ministries, namely the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the Institute for Defence Strategy and the Institute for Defence International Relations (Ministry of Defence), the Department of Public Security History, Science, and Strategic Studies (Ministry of Public Security), the Central Institute for Economic Management, and the Vietnam Institute for Development Strategies (Ministry of Planning and Investment), also participated in the process. In terms of providing foreign policy inputs and recommendations, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam as its research arm, played a key facilitating role by conducting in-house and collaborative research with relevant counterpart stakeholders (Le and Tsvetov 2018: 6).

The Central Theoretical Council played a notably important role in this process as it gathered the research findings and recommendations of think-tanks. The Council, directly affiliated with the CPV Central Committee and typically led by a Politburo member, was tasked with the official responsibility of incorporating inputs on international situation analyses, reviews of and recommendations for the implementation of Vietnam's overall foreign policy. Such inputs were also drawn from a state-level research programme coordinated by the Council and carried out by relevant ministries and agencies. It comprised various projects that argued for new or optimal national defence and development approaches, guidelines, and strategies from both theoretical and practical perspectives. The recommendations were forwarded to ministries and agencies within the Party, National Assembly, and Government systems, as well as retired high-ranking officials, for consultation. The Central Theoretical Council carefully considered all the feedback and opinions received.

At the highest level, the Party Central Committee and the Politburo played the core roles in policy and decision-making. To prepare for the Thirteenth National Congress, at its Twelfth Plenum held in October 2018, the Central Committee established five sub-committees, including the Documents Sub-Committee (*Tiểu ban Văn kiện*) and the Socio-Economic Sub-Committee (*Tiểu ban Kinh tế - Xã hội*) in charge of preparing policy documents to be introduced at the Congress (*Vietnam News Agency* 2019). The Chairman of the Central Theoretical Council was tasked with leading the Editorial Group (*Tổ Biên tập*) within the Documents Sub-Committee, consisting of, among others, key members of the Council who drafted specific sections of the Political Report based on their respective areas of expertise. In this regard, the Central Theoretical Council took a major responsibility and active role in preparing the documents for the Thirteenth Party National Congress (National Academy of Public Administration 2021). The Editorial Group was allowed to attend meetings of the Documents Sub-Committee, where they penned the points under discussion and received the instructions to incorporate them into the revised drafts. In addition, they attended the Party Congress, where they assisted the Presidium (*Chủ tịch đoàn*) in preparing summaries of the discussions on the drafted documents to be presented to the Congress. Following the Congress, they were the ones who assisted the new Central Committee in finalising the texts of official policy documents. In so doing, the Central Theoretical Council did play its significant role as an advisory body to the Party Central Committee, the Politburo, and the Secretariat. It coordinated to gather and connect wisdom and knowledge through the cooperation and participation of central and local departments, ministries and agencies, scientific research institutions, academies, and scientists throughout the country, thereby creating a basis for planning, completing, and developing the Party's policy lines, and serving the leadership work of the Party

(*Nhan dan Online* 2016; *Nhan dan Online* 2021a). Its role in the overall national development strategy and foreign policy formulation process has been increasingly formalised and institutionalised.

Due to the significance of the work, the Party General-Secretary headed the Documents Sub-Committee and directly oversaw the preparation of the Political Report. The Socio-Economic Development Strategy was prepared by the Socio-Economic Sub-Committee headed by the Prime Minister. The executive branch, i.e., the Government, was responsible for the preparation of the 5-Year and 10-Year Socio-Economic Development Strategies. The Ministry of Planning and Investment (MIP) was a key actor tasked with drafting the Strategies. MIP relied on its in-house think-tanks, namely the Vietnam Institute for Development Strategies (VIDS) and the Institute for Central Economic Management (CIEM), to accomplish the job. The VIDS and CIEM were expected to collaborate closely with the Central Theoretical Council, sharing inputs and ensuring that the work on the Strategies was on the same page as that on the Political Report being prepared by the latter. Under the guidance of the Politburo, the sub-committees coordinated with think-tanks, ministries and agencies, and provincial and local Party branches to organise approximately sixty conferences and seminars, fifty field trips, and consultations with former high-ranking leaders of the Party and the Government, experts, and international organisations to prepare the contents of the documents. The think-tanks submitted nearly eighty reports with policy recommendations. The sub-committees conducted twenty sessions to discuss and adopt the policy document drafts, ensuring consistency among the documents with the Political Report as the core. The drafts were finalised after thirty rounds of revision (Communist Party of Vietnam 2021: 16–17).

The Party devoted approximately six months to a nationwide consultation on the full draft of the documents, particularly the Political Report, which includes the foreign policy section, through mass media to enable Vietnamese people from all walks of life to access the drafts. The Party, along with major mass organisations in the country, including the Vietnam Fatherland Front, the Veterans Association of Vietnam, the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, the Vietnam Women's Union, and the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour, utilised their central and local branches to conduct discussions on these documents. The Documents Sub-Committee received millions of comments which it took into consideration to finalise the drafts (Communist Party of Vietnam 2021: 18). In the last phase, the Central Committee approved the final drafts of the documents before they were presented to the Party National Congress, where the delegates scrutinised them during several discussion sessions. The Congress, being the highest authority in policy and decision-making, approved the documents by a show of hands in the plenary session.

The broadening of the participatory policy formulation process in Vietnam has its merits. It reflects the efforts by the CPV to solicit as broad a spectrum of opinions from within and outside the Party as possible. The effort to engage more actors in foreign policymaking and thereby garner more inputs is important for the CPV in at least two aspects. Firstly, it is the means of gaining society's approval for the conduct of the country's foreign affairs in terms of form and substance. In this regard, given that the Party is the force leading the state, society, and the conduct of the country's foreign affairs, the Vietnamese people generally accord the CPV high credit for an effective foreign policy since *Doi Moi* began in the mid-1980s. Foreign affairs has made a significant contribution to preserving the peaceful and stable environment for national development, proactively and responsibly promoting regional and global peace, cooperation, and prosperity, and considerably enhancing the prestige and credibility of the Party and the Government, as well as the country's strength and posture in the international arena (Communist Party of Vietnam 2021: 22–23).

Secondly, and more importantly, the CPV seeks to ensure a broader consensus on foreign policy in the context of changing internal and external dynamics. Domestically, as Vietnam becomes more open to the rest of the world with more pervasive and apparent impacts of international integration in every aspect of society, there is a greater need to strengthen consensus on the awareness and perception of national interests. With national interest being identified as the most important factor shaping the country's foreign policy and its external relations, the abstract idea of national interest must be operationalised in a way that ensures that foreign affairs, particularly economic diplomacy for development, eventually benefit all spheres of society, with the people and businesses at the centre (Communist Party of Vietnam

2021: 50). This benefit-based approach, in its turn, aims to forge a broader domestic consensus on foreign policy and, subsequently, participation in its implementation.

Identifying and assessing challenges and opportunities for Vietnam's foreign affairs in the external environment, which informs the country's foreign policy priorities, also necessitates consensus. As evidenced by the discussions and the final foreign policy text, while greater importance has been accorded to the continuation of the foreign policy that the CPV has been pursuing for the last several decades, the necessity of adapting policy to the changes in the regional and global environment, which should be based on consensus in terms of both awareness and action, has also been emphasised. The CPV's consensus-based and participatory approach to foreign policy formulation is, in essence, part of its whole-nation approach to foreign policy implementation (Le and Lai 2021; Pham 2021).

In another sense, the above-mentioned process suggests that Vietnam's foreign policy formulation gradually follows the conventional policy formulation procedure. It is primarily based on analysing the external conditions, particularly Vietnam's geo-strategic and geo-economic landscapes. In doing so, significant emphasis has been placed on the unfolding US-China strategic competition and its ensuing force alignments and realignments. Many in Hanoi believe Sino-US relations have become a determining factor in the development of international relations in the Asia-Pacific and beyond (Nhat Dang 2020; Pham 2021; Thai 2020). Vietnam's foreign policy, considered an extension of domestic policies, has also been informed by the national development goals. In other words, foreign policy objectives and priorities are largely shaped and implemented in accordance with the realisation of domestic goals.

The Thirteenth Party National Congress in 2021 identified the national development goals of a "developing country with an industry moving toward modernity and having passed over the lower-middle income level by 2025, developing country with a modern industry and upper-middle income level by 2030, and developed country with high-income status by 2045" (Communist Party of Vietnam 2021: 36). Accordingly, upholding the foreign policy of independence, autonomy, multilateralisation, and diversification, as well as proactive, comprehensive, extensive, and effective international integration, is set to be one of the thirteen central tasks on this development path (Communist Party of Vietnam 2021: 38). Another basis for formulating the foreign policy for the new term is evaluating how the previous five-year term's foreign policy was carried out. In this regard, the CPV has been increasingly candid in assessing both accomplishments and limitations. Putting foreign policy formulation and implementation in the context of national development, the general assessment held in Vietnam is that foreign policy has been largely instrumental and effective in helping the CPV and the country to better secure national security, mobilise external resources for economic development, and elevate Vietnam's international standing. Simultaneously, foreign policy formulation and implementation have been increasingly formalised to become a nationwide effort in terms of both process and content (Bui 2021; Le and Lai 2021).

It takes time for the participatory process to evolve. There might have been expectations for more open debates in which diverse viewpoints are contested and specific policy options are challenged. Nevertheless, the introduction of such a process was significant in the context of Vietnam's engaging contemporary politics. No similar process had occurred on such a large scale before, nor had it been institutionalised and utilised as a platform for policy discussion, notably with the use of social media. Besides, the foreign policy cliché "politics stops at the water's edge" suggests that it will be easier to reach a higher level of consensus on matters pertaining to ensuring national interests. This is especially true given that, as noted above, the CPV's foreign policy has been widely regarded as effective.

Foreign Policy Emphases and Priorities: Elements of Continuity and Adjustment

Since *Doi Moi*, continuity has been a prominent feature of Vietnam's foreign policy. This was evident in the Thirteenth National Congress of the CPV (Chheang and Nguyen 2021; Thayer 2021). The Political Report of the Congress reaffirmed that Vietnam continues to pursue a foreign policy of independence, autonomy, diversification, and multilateralisation of foreign relations as well as that of peace, friendship, and cooperation as a friend, credible partner, and a responsible member of the international community. Successive CPV Congresses have consistently adopted this policy line since the 1990s. It re-emphasised the ultimate foreign policy objective of securing the interests of the nation-state, which was first officially stated at the Eleventh Congress in 2011, defined on the principles of the United Nations Charter

and international laws, equality, cooperation, and mutual benefits (Communist Party of Vietnam 2021: 161–162).

There is also continuity in the combination of cooperation and competition in the conduct of foreign policy. This approach was first documented in the Resolution entitled “Strategic Directions of Defending the Fatherland in the New Situation,” issued at the Eighth Central Committee Plenum in July 2003, with the introduction of the terms “partner” (*đồng tác*) and “object of struggle” (*đối tượng*) applied in any set of Vietnam’s external relations. This was reiterated in the Political Reports of the Eleventh and Twelfth Party Congresses. It implies the primacy of pragmatic considerations of national interests over ideological ones in the formulation and implementation of Vietnam’s foreign policy. It also indicates that Hanoi has abandoned the friend-or-foe binary approach in its relations with other countries, endeavouring to promote international cooperation while resolutely safeguarding its national interests (Palmujoki 1999; Thayer 1994: 513–428). In addition, it demonstrates the recognition by Vietnamese policymakers of the co-existence of both the cooperative and competitive natures of international relations, particularly among major powers (Dang 2016: 24–27).

The tendency of continuity in Vietnam’s foreign policy stems primarily from the policy’s success over the past several decades. “The country [Vietnam] has never had such a great fortune, potential, international stature and prestige as it is having now,” asserted Secretary-General Nguyen Phu Trong at the Thirteenth Congress and on several other occasions when reviewing the thirty-five years of *Doi Moi* (Communist Party of Vietnam: 25; *Nhan dan Online* 2021b). This observation was mainly directed to the domestic audience, affirming the CPV’s leadership and legitimacy. Nevertheless, it also reflected the widely-acknowledged reality of Vietnam’s successful course of *Doi Moi*, which highlighted the role played by foreign affairs (Chapman 2021). In his speech earlier at the Thirtieth Diplomatic Conference held in Hanoi in 2018, the Secretary-General remarked that foreign affairs had become a bright spot in the country’s overall achievements (Nguyen 2018). Gains from an effective foreign policy underlined the emphasis on the pioneering role of diplomacy in the national defence and development strategy. This can be traced back to the approach adopted by the CPV in Resolution number thirteen of the Politburo in 1988, which held that a strong economy, sufficiently strong national defence, and expanded international cooperation would provide Vietnam with greater capabilities to preserve its national independence and successfully build socialism (Vu 2002: 66). The Resolution tacitly recognised the role of an effective foreign policy of “being friend to all and enemy to none” that could ensure national security and mobilise resources for economic development. Therefore, continuity in foreign policy is the result of and signified by a greater emphasis on efficiency in foreign affairs in Vietnam’s national development discourse. In other words, Hanoi adopted the classical approach, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet bloc, considering diplomacy as the first line of defence (Tung 2010: 117).

Acknowledging that the global and regional outlook continues to be affected by fast-changing, complicated, and unpredictable developments, particularly intensifying great power competition (Communist Party of Vietnam 2021: 30), Hanoi continues to maintain its primary foreign policy orientations unchanged because it is aware that there exist several trends that allow it to continue doing so in the coming years. It is acknowledged that cooperation remains the mainstream in international relations, conditioned by entrenched globalisation and the advancement of the 4.0 technological revolution. There is also the possibility of great powers exploring areas of cooperation among themselves in the midst of competition and courting other countries as competition intensifies, resulting in coexistence and cooperation between and among countries with diverse political, economic, and value systems. Furthermore, Hanoi believes that the opportunity to promote regional and global multilateral diplomacy should not be eliminated (Vu 2021). Deliberating on this, Deputy Prime Minister Pham Binh Minh said, “the world has entered the third decade of the twenty-first century, witnessing fundamental, swift, and unpredictable changes with direct and multi-dimensional impacts on our national security and development environment. Amidst difficulties and challenges, however, we still see the light of opportunities and advantages” (Pham 2021). Thus, despite the fact that the external environment is becoming increasingly complicated and fast-changing, there is no sense of urgency to change Vietnam’s current foreign policy discourse.

The country has the resources necessary to increase the reach of its foreign policy. In terms of human resources, a more competent foreign service has bolstered Hanoi’s confidence that Vietnam can become

more visible in the regional and global arenas (Nguyen 2018). The institutional management of foreign policy implementation is also a contributing factor. The three pillars of state, party, and people-to-people diplomacy, as well as other contingents engaged in foreign affairs, have collaborated on a wide range of areas within the framework of comprehensive diplomacy and a common regulation of foreign affairs management.² In this regard, Vietnam's participation in the United Nations Peace Keeping Operation missions and its efforts to get elected to the United Nations positions such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), and the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL), are salient cases in point. Pham Binh Minh has outlined the basis for Hanoi to pursue loftier foreign policy objectives. They include "the strength and solidarity of the entire political system, trust, companionship, and support of the people as well as the maturity and enthusiasm of those in charge of foreign affairs. These are solid premises for Vietnam to forge ahead into the year 2021 and beyond with a new posture" (Pham 2021).

In short, the recognised relevance and effectiveness of the existing foreign policy, and favourable external conditions created by global and regional economic and political trends, combined with better institutional and human resources to conduct foreign affairs, are the primary factors that explain the continuity in Vietnam's foreign policy adopted by the Thirteenth Party Congress. In that consistency, greater significance has been attached to foreign affairs as playing a pioneering role with a more proactive contribution to the country's overall national development and defence.

The three primary tasks of Vietnam's foreign policy, as identified by the Congress, continue to be: preserving a peaceful and stable environment, mobilising external resources for national development, and enhancing the nation's status and prestige. To realise them, however, significant adjustments have been made to the embedded priorities and emphases. The first and foremost task of preserving a peaceful and stable environment is not only stressed in the text related to foreign policy but is also included in the Congress's overall theme, by which the CPV not only considered peace as one of the highest national interests but also implied greater acknowledgement of and emphasis on the role and contribution of effective conduct of foreign affairs.

The preservation of a peaceful and stable environment is also linked to the notion of modern diplomacy, particularly "to protect the Fatherland in advance and from afar" (Communist Party of Vietnam 2021: 50; *Nhan Dan Online* 2021b; Nguyen 2016; Pham 2021). The idea of national defence "in advance and from afar" can be traced back to Ho Chi Minh's thinking of "defending the country before the dangers come". It was first introduced at the Twelfth Party Congress and reiterated three times in the Thirteenth Party Congress documents. It entails protecting the country within and beyond its territorial boundaries, identifying and building contingency plans, and taking early measures to prevent potential risks of war and conflict, i.e., pro-active national defence by peaceful means and not necessarily by means of war (Do 2017; Nguyen 2021). While the Twelfth Congress focused mainly on internal disruptions that could lead to risks of war and conflict, the Thirteenth Congress emphasised both internal and external ones. In essence, this approach is the broader recognition of the classic and conventional function of diplomacy as the first line of defence, by making Vietnam a friend to all and enemy to none.

Enhancing Vietnam's comprehensive strength, to which the task of mobilising external resources for national development is largely attributed, is one of the priority measures to protect the country "in advance and from afar". It is consistent with the new emphasis on pro-active, effective, comprehensive, and extensive international integration (Communist Party of Vietnam 2021: 60). The elevation of the country's international integration to a comprehensive and extensive level implies that external resources would be amassed not only through increased trade, investment, and assistance from foreign countries, but more importantly, through the quest for a higher position in regional and global supply, production, and value chains. The goal is to realise the national development vision and roadmap by 2045.

The aspiration to build Vietnam into a socialist-oriented developed country, rising among the middle powers by the mid-twenty-first century, is another foreign policy adjustment with regard to enhancing

²Quyết định số 272-QĐ/TW ngày 21/01/2015 của Bộ Chính trị Khoa XI về việc ban hành Quy chế quản lý thông nhất các hoạt động đối ngoại (Decision number 22-QĐ/TW on 21 January 21, 2015 of the Eleventh Politburo on the issuance of the common regulation on foreign affairs management).

the nation's stature and prestige (Rinaudo 2021). Vietnam has lately been seen as meeting certain criteria of a middle power, particularly in terms of political will to participate actively in regional and global affairs (Chen and Ratnam 2013; Do 2022; Emmers and Teo 2015; Erskine 2022; Kratiuk 2014; Le 2021; Vu *et al.* 2020). This is evidenced by Hanoi's self-imaging as "a credible friend and partner, and a responsible member of the international community," having established strategic and/or comprehensive partnerships with thirty countries and actively participating and contributing to major regional and global multilateral mechanisms, most notably ASEAN and the UN.

The three foreign policy tasks are cross-cutting, mutually reinforcing, and closely linked with the enhancement of national security, economic development, and international standing, which the Thirteenth Party Congress deemed to be Vietnam's highest national interests over the next five years. More importantly, they inform the primary foreign policy priorities with the following elements of adjustment.

First, protection of territorial integrity

The East Sea (South China Sea) issue has become an increasingly salient point in Vietnam's foreign policy. Policymakers in Hanoi have assessed that territorial and maritime disputes will become more intense, complicated, and severe and that peace, stability, security, safety, freedom of navigation, and aviation in the South China Sea will be threatened by the risk of armed conflicts (Communist Party of Vietnam 2021: 107). It is also a thorny issue in the bilateral relationship between Vietnam and China, where nationalistic sentiments appear to increase pressure on both sides to stand firm in their respective positions. Meanwhile, international pressure and criticism, particularly from Washington and its allies, have been mounting against China's behaviour on this matter. This situation presents Hanoi with both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, there are concerns that the issue will invite greater US involvement, thus placing the South China Sea at the centre of US-China competition in the Indo-Pacific region. This could result in higher possibility, though hypothetical, of either open military conflicts or secret compromises between Washington and Beijing at the expense of the interests of smaller countries. On the other hand, expectations are rising for greater external constraints on future Chinese activities in the region, as well as for ASEAN's role in managing the situation in the South China Sea through promoting the principles of respecting freedom of navigation, peaceful resolution of territorial disputes, and enlisting continued commitments from other powers to regional peace and stability.

Hanoi cannot lose sight of its most important task, which is to preserve a peaceful and stable environment for national economic development, even as it prioritises the South China Sea issue. The key to this, adopted by the Thirteenth Congress, was the reconfirmation of the approach of "resoluteness and persistence" (*kiên quyết, kiên trì*) in the pursuit of national interests (Le 2021). Vietnam's official posture continues to be that it will struggle resolutely and persistently against all violations of its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity while simultaneously promoting a peaceful resolution to territorial disputes and ensuring security, safety, and freedom of navigation and aviation. This approach suggests several policy options that include urging respect for the rules-based maritime order based on the 1982 UNCLOS and the 2016 South China Sea arbitration award by the Arbitral Tribunal instituted under Annex VII of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), conducting negotiations between ASEAN and China for an effective and substantial code of conduct (COC), while implementing in earnest the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) in the South China Sea. Hanoi places greater emphasis on utilising the ASEAN-led platforms to address the South China Sea issue, twining it into the larger context of regional peace and stability, and promoting international cooperation on non-sensitive issues such as environmental protection, anti-piracy, and fish stock protection. At the bottom line, the "resoluteness and persistence" approach is compatible with the efforts to protect the country "in advance and from afar," which Hanoi considers "the best course of action" (Nguyen 2021).

Second, greater focus on deepening bilateral relations

Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son affirmed that Vietnam would deepen its relationships with the thirty countries that are Vietnam's strategic and/or comprehensive partners through the promotion of intertwined interests, political trust, and consolidation of the institutional arrangements for bilateral relations

(Bui 2021). The intensifying Sino-US competition with resulting dynamics in the triangular relations involving Hanoi, Washington, and Beijing, as well as Vietnam's growing bilateral partnership arrangements³ and its proactive membership in ASEAN and the UN provide the context for Hanoi's efforts to further strengthen its bilateral relations (Communist Party of Vietnam 2021: 163).

One of the most notable outcomes and illustrations of the success of Vietnam's foreign policy is that it has managed to establish and enjoy positive bilateral relations with other countries, including all major powers. However, as competition, even rivalry, between Washington and Beijing intensifies, Hanoi finds it increasingly difficult to perform the balancing act aimed at avoiding being trapped in great power politics and/or being forced to choose side. The following foreign policy emphases are, therefore, likely to predominate in Hanoi's playbook in the future in order to effectively carry out this extremely delicate task of diplomacy.

First and foremost, Vietnamese policymakers continue to insist on the policy of independence, autonomy, diversification, and multi-direction of Vietnam's external relations, accompanied by the effort to be a credible friend and partner of all other countries and a responsible member of the international community. In conjunction with this is the pledge to adhere to the "four-nos" principles of national defence, i.e., no military alliances, no foreign bases on Vietnam's territory, no alignment with a second country against a third party, and no use of force or threat to use force in international relations. Vietnam's latest Defence White Paper issued in 2019 stated, however, that depending on the circumstances and specific conditions, the country would consider developing necessary, appropriate defence and military relations with other countries (Vietnamese Ministry of National Defence 2019). Analysts view the addition of "one-depending" to the "four-nos" as underscoring the need to strengthen bilateral defence ties with countries that can support Vietnam's national interests while broadening the spectrum of its strategic choices and indicating a causal link between the sources of risks that deteriorate or threaten Vietnam's external peaceful and stable environment and its choice of partners to deepen defence cooperation (Grossman and Sharman 2019; Nguyen 2019).

Hanoi also strictly applies the "partner and object of struggle" approach to Washington and Beijing, intending to promote all-round relations with both powers while simultaneously managing the differences and utilising the dynamics of its bilateral relations with each to promote those with the other. Against this backdrop, the emphasis on the cooperative trend and potential cooperation between big powers suggests Hanoi's assessment that it can still find opportunities to advance its relations with both competing powers without facing the worst-case scenario of choosing side (Do 2020).

As a way of bettering the balancing act among powers, Hanoi increasingly utilises the ASEAN and ASEAN-led platforms and relies on ASEAN's collective stance in dealing with emerging issues, as seen in the Association's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and its statements on the QUAD (in the relations with Washington), and the South China Sea and the Mekong as well as the BRI (in the relations with Beijing). In addition, relations are forged between Vietnam and middle powers to encourage a force alignment centred neither on Beijing nor Washington while promoting the centrality of ASEAN (Le 2020; Ngoc Lan 2021).

Third, international integration

Before the Twelfth Congress, international integration mostly had an economic connotation to Hanoi's efforts at ensuring Vietnam's place in the regional and international labour division (Bui 2015). In 2016, a domestic consensus was reached on broadening the scope of international integration to include all aspects of Vietnam's external relations other than economic, as the Twelfth Party Congress stated that Vietnam would "conduct the course of international integration in the economic and other fields in a pro-active manner" (Communist Party of Vietnam 2016). The implications were two-fold. One was Vietnam's new priority of negotiating and entering into new-generation multilateral free trade

³By 2022, Vietnam has established comprehensive and strategic partnership with three countries, namely China, Russia and India; strategic partnership with fourteen countries, namely Japan, the Republic of Korea, Spain, the UK, Germany, Italy, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, France, Malaysia, the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand; and comprehensive partnership with thirteen countries, namely South Africa, Brazil, Chile, Venezuela, Argentina, Ukraine, the U.S., Denmark, Canada, Myanmar, Hungary, Brunei, and the Netherlands.

agreements that cover non-trade aspects such as environmental protection and labour rights. In roughly five years since 2016, Hanoi has managed to sign six free trade agreements of the new generation, namely the Vietnam-Eurasian Economic Union Free Trade Agreement (VN-EAEU), the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the ASEAN-Hong Kong China Free Trade Agreement (AHKFTA), the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA), the UK-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (UKVFTA), and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

The other was a greater emphasis on the defence establishment's participation in multilateral security and mil-to-mil cooperative arrangements at the regional and global levels. This facilitated Vietnam's more active participation in the United Nations Peace Keeping Operation (PKO) and the ADMM+. Vietnam's Defence White Paper in 2019 reiterated that "Vietnam advocates developing defence cooperation with all nations, especially its neighbouring ones, strategic partners, comprehensive partners, building confidence and garnering international support and assistance to preclude and respond to the risk of wars of aggression," and "promotes multilateral defence cooperation with a view to contributing to ensuring national defence, security, and national sovereignty" (Vietnamese Ministry of National Defence 2019). Accordingly, Vietnam's defence diplomacy would entail and prioritise the expansion of all forms of bilateral and multilateral cooperation, including exchange of military delegations at all levels, defence consultation and dialogue, information and experience sharing, cooperation in training and education, and coordination in coping with humanitarian and security issues of common concerns.⁴ Through the promotion of trust building, preventive diplomacy, and the rule of law, defence diplomacy, therefore, forms an integral part of the proactive effort at national defence in advance and from afar.

The new emphasis on comprehensive and extensive international integration, introduced at the Thirteenth Party Congress, is an outcome of a broader consensus in Hanoi regarding the future policy direction of increased openness and participation in all aspects of its external relations. In addition, the conduct of international integration will be aligned with the elevation of multilateral diplomacy, another foreign policy priority, thereby demonstrating Hanoi's increased institutional, human, and financial engagement and commitment to a broader range of regional and global issues. This has been demonstrated by Vietnam's commitment and participation in the ASEAN Community building efforts, which have become increasingly comprehensive based on the three main pillars of political, economic, and socio-cultural cooperation and within the UN framework (*Nhan dan Online* 2021b). Regarding economic integration, the new emphasis is on deeper integration into regional and global production and value chains and the elevation of Vietnam's position in these chains, which could be obtained through enhanced efforts to improve the country's economic competitiveness.⁵ Economic diplomacy for development has been elevated in importance and placed at the service of businesses and the people. The designation of businesses and the people as primary beneficiaries of economic diplomacy marks a signature in the foreign policy of the new Congress, which is closely associated with the promotion of national development aspirations and, perhaps more importantly, the provision of a more pragmatic understanding of national interests (Communist Party of Vietnam 2021: 154). However, it is worth noting that Hanoi is not without caution about the negative impacts of international integration and globalisation. This helps explain the stressing of national interest as the underlining principle and ultimate objective of international integration (Communist Party of Vietnam 2021: 162).

Fourth, the elevation of multilateral diplomacy

The official introduction of the elevation of Vietnam's multilateral diplomacy at the Thirteenth Congress added a new dimension to Hanoi's foreign policy. In fact, multilateralism had enjoyed the CPV's endorsement earlier when the Twelfth Party Congress identified multilateral diplomacy as a strategic direction of Vietnam's foreign affairs, and the CPV Secretariat issued the Directive coded 25-CT/TW on 8 August 2018, outlining the rationale and guidelines for the elevation of Vietnam's multilateral diplomacy until 2030. Elevation refers to Hanoi's endeavour to progress beyond participation to "a core, leading and/or mediating role" and contribute to shaping the rules of the game at multilateral organisations and fora of strategic significance as identified by measures of national interest (Le 2019). Hanoi's actual

⁴Foreign Relations and Defence Cooperation, at <http://www.mod.gov.vn/wps/portal>

⁵Minister of Trade and Industry Tran Tuan Anh's speech at the Thirteenth National Congress of the CPV

and growing pro-activeness in multilateral mechanisms, particularly its high international recognition achieved during the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2020, the non-permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council during 2020–2021, and the Vice Presidency of the United Nations General Assembly's 77th session during 2022–2023, has provided the premise for the country to pursue a greater role and contribution with regard to multilateral diplomacy. Priorities of Vietnam's multilateral diplomacy in the coming years include proactive participation and role in multilateral institutions, particularly ASEAN, the UN, APEC, and the Mekong sub-regional, regional, and international cooperative frameworks, as well as a greater footprint in shaping multilateral institutions and international political and economic order, and full implementation of international commitments and trade agreements (Communist Party of Vietnam 2021: 163–164).

According to Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son, the promotion of multilateral diplomacy is mutually supportive of the deepening of Vietnam's bilateral relationships and accelerating international integration with a view to strengthening its comprehensive national power, raising its international standing, and maintaining peaceful and stable external conditions (*The gioi & Vietnam* 2021). Nguyen Nguyet Nga, one of the leading proponents of Vietnam's multilateral diplomacy, noted that Vietnam's new approach to multilateral diplomacy was demonstrated in various aspects that included ensuring a peaceful external environment beyond the regional one, mobilising more resources and creating more room for national development, linking Vietnam to larger international security and development agendas, and developing a whole-nation and whole-government approach to foreign relations. To this end, Hanoi was urged to play a more significant role in multilateral organisations and groupings through various initiatives and by offering ideas, human and financial contributions, as well as coordination and mediation efforts, with the ultimate goal of influencing the process of forming new visions, agendas, procedures, and rules of the game of both existing and new multilateral institutions in the areas of global and regional security and development (Phan 2020). However, the Congress cautioned that the elevation of multilateral diplomacy would depend on "specific needs, actual conditions, and available resources" (Communist Party of Vietnam 2021: 164). In essence, the new driving force behind Hanoi's eagerness for multilateral diplomacy is growing domestic support for the promotion of Vietnam's nation brand as a middle power that is more cognizant of the opportunity to promote its international status and striving for the rule of law through multilateralism as a means to respond to crude power politics in international relations based on its newly accumulated resources and capacities after more than three decades of reforms.

Conclusion

The foreign policy adopted by the Thirteenth CPV National Congress represents both continuity and adjustment to better prepare the country to cope with the rapid changes in the external strategic landscape and meet the needs of the country in its advanced stage of national development. The identification and implementation of the foreign policy tasks also suggest increased efforts by Hanoi to conduct its foreign policy on a broader basis of domestic consensus and participation through improved inter-agency coordination and a whole-government/whole-nation approach to foreign affairs. In this regard, the Thirteenth Congress not only reaffirms the pioneering role played by foreign affairs as analysed above but also highlights the greater need to have modern and comprehensive diplomacy in terms of actors (namely party, state, and people-to-people), fields (namely political, economic, defence, social, cultural, parliamentary), and capacity of the establishment and personnel in charge of the actual conduct of foreign affairs (Communist Party of Vietnam 2021: 162–165; Le and Lai 2021; *Nhan Dan Online* 2021b; Pham 2021). In the final analysis, continuity and adjustment of Vietnam's foreign policy as part of its overall national development and defence strategy for the new decade promises increased visibility and contribution of the country in the regional and global arenas.

The case of Vietnam's foreign policy implies that the approach to diplomacy as the first line of defence is of growing relevance, particularly for small and medium-sized countries and especially as the events in and around Ukraine unfolded. It also indicates that as the effective conduct of foreign affairs has become increasingly important to the promotion of national security and the well-being of the people in many, if not all, countries, the formulation and implementation of foreign policy are expected to be more inclusive and institutionalised. Such a process helps ensure a broad and robust consensus among stakeholders at

the national level, thus enhancing the state's legitimacy and capacity to conduct the country's foreign affairs. It also provides better conditions and contexts from which a higher level of accountability and transparency can be achieved in the field of public policy, which is equally important.

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