

## Does Ideology Matter in Vietnam's Foreign Policy?

**In matters of national security and national interests, Vietnamese leaders are pragmatists.**

By Nguyen Cao Viet Hung

In a recently published article in *The Diplomat*, Duy Hoang, leader of the anti-communist group Viet Tan, proclaimed that the latest visit by Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong to China was a symbol of Vietnam's deference to China. He went on to criticize the visit as a move to signal the desire for closer ties with China by Vietnamese leaders, despite the ongoing territorial disputes in the South China Sea and growing anti-China sentiments among the domestic audience. Throughout the article, Vietnam's foreign policy was portrayed as seemingly revolving around communist ideology. Yet, the facts and evidence paint a very different picture.

The author's argument might have been correct for Vietnam's foreign policy during the Cold War. Yet, we are living in a different world. The post-Cold War international environment with the (relatively) declining power of the U.S. and the rising challenges from other regional powers like Russia and China present countries, such as Vietnam, with a question: How should they act in such an uncertain situation, when the Cold War strategies of bandwagoning and balancing seem outdated? Hedging, having both cooperative and confrontational elements, seems to be the ideal strategy. At its core, hedging entails maintaining good relationships with both sides of a competition, while at the same time exploring options through building connections with other major powers and participating actively in international organizations. The ultimate goal of this strategy is to maximize the national interest, and avoid choosing sides when there is too much uncertainty.

Vietnam's foreign policy after Doi Moi is a prime example of this strategy. The principle guiding foreign policy, established in the 6th Party Congress of 1986 and revised and reiterated in every congress after that, was that Vietnam is an independent, non-aligned country, that seeks to be friends with other countries in order to maximize national interests. Vietnamese officials often cite Ho Chi Minh's famous quote: "There is no other interests but the interests of the nation, of the country" when explaining Vietnam's foreign policy. Guided by this principle, Vietnam has not only maintained a good relationship with both the United States and China, but also expanded its network of partners to include countries like Japan, South Korea, and Australia, all of which are on the other side of the ideological spectrum. Vietnam has also participated actively in regional and international institutions such as ASEAN and the United Nations, contributing the peacekeeping operations and other missions. If ideology is really that important to Vietnam's foreign policy, we would never have seen this level of engagement.

Furthermore, Duy claimed that ideology, or specifically "a nostalgia for the Soviet Union," is behind Vietnam's decision to abstain when voting on U.N. resolutions related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Yet, what he seems to be forgetting is that Vietnam relies heavily on Russia for arms imports. In order to modernize its military and deter China's aggression in the South

China Sea, Hanoi needs to stay on good terms with Moscow. Again, calculations about national interests, not ideology, drives Vietnam's international behaviors.

To prove Vietnam's deference to China, the author cited the reports that Trong emphasized the position of rejecting foreign military bases and alliances with other countries. He claimed that Trong "has gone further than any other communist Vietnam leader in prioritizing relations with China." Yet, reiterating these points to China is perhaps the Vietnamese leader's way of saying: Vietnam will not choose sides in the competition between China and the U.S., and Hanoi's foreign policy will neither be influenced by nor favor any country.

One can argue both ways here: It can be an act of showing deference, but it can also be an act of proclaiming independence and non-alignment. The more complete version of the principles mentioned by Trong is in Vietnam's Defense White Paper. The most recent version, published in 2019, clearly stated the "four noes": no alliances, no foreign bases on Vietnamese territory, no alignment with a second country against a third, and the latest addition of no using force or threatening to use force in international relations. However, it also clearly stated that Vietnam is open to developing defense and military cooperation with other countries "depending on the circumstances and specific conditions." The document shows Vietnam's pragmatic approach to foreign policy and national security, without even a hint of any influence of ideology.

The author cited reports from the Pew Research Center and the BBC to support his claim of the Vietnamese domestic audience's unfavorable view of China. Yet, according to a new report by the Central European Institute of Asian Studies, the sentiment seems to be rather balanced between favorable and unfavorable. Clearly, the Vietnamese street's anti-China sentiment might not be as high as conventional wisdom dictates. Regarding the views on Trong's visit to China, if we are to measure it according to Facebook comments, one wrote: "I wish that the friendly bilateral ties will be further strengthened and deepened so that the people of the two countries will reap the benefits, realizing the desire for socialism in each country." Others commented on the fact that Trong received a medal that was not given to many other leaders as showing how much respect Xi has for the Vietnamese leader and that it shows how important bilateral ties are for China. Clearly, Facebook comments mean nothing: the social media platform is an echo chamber where you can see what you want to see, and ignore what you do not. The anecdotal comments cannot be seen as concrete measurements of how the visit was received by the domestic audience.

In conclusion, national interests, rather than ideology, are the motivation behind Vietnam's foreign policy. That is not to say ideology does not play a role in shaping Vietnam's behaviors in international politics. Yet, Vietnamese leaders are not ideologists; in matters of national security, they are pragmatists.

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