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The Trouble With Vietnam's Defense Strategy

Vietnam needs more radical thinking on defense in order to adapt and keep pace with changes in the region.

By Thoi Nguyen

After a 10 year gap, Vietnam released a new defense white paper in December. The 2019 White Paper on Vietnam National Defense outlined Vietnam's current defense position. There is growing concern about Vietnam's defense strategy – the country needs to have a dynamic strategy for the future that reflects its defense position in Asia. Vietnam's position is reaching a difficult point if the country sticks with their current defense posture and wants to settle all disputes favorably.

Asia is facing major geopolitical challenges due to China's rise in power and its escalation of territorial claims in the South China Sea, the nuclear arms race, cyber threats, and the rise of terrorism in the Asia-Pacific region. The world is also more dangerous under an unpredictable and volatile U.S. president, Donald Trump. In these uncertain times, when the regional situation is complicated and unpredictable, Vietnam needs to develop a defense strategy in order to adapt and keep pace with those changes in the region.

The country's latest defense white paper was categorized into three parts: the strategic context and national defense policy, building the all-people national defense, and the development of the Vietnam People's Army. It has more interesting developments than the 2009 white paper, but the two main principles of Vietnam's defense policy are still peace and self-defense.

Vietnam wants to make "more friends and less enemies" and that phrase is reflected in its continuous Three Noes defense policy: no joining any military alliances, no aligning with a particular state over another, and no foreign bases on its soil to threaten the sovereignty of others. Notably, the new document highlighted a new "no" — "not using force or threatening the use of force in international relations" — but the meaning of this assertion is rather vague. Despite the additional "no," it is expected that Vietnam's overall defense position will not change.

Vietnam's deputy minister of national defense, Colonel General Vinh Chi Nguyen, said last month in an interview that Vietnam launched this new defense white paper in order for all Vietnamese to understand the current national defense strategy.

The deputy minister emphasized that Vietnam will preserve its existing military equipment and maintain it for immediate use. Vietnam has focused on improving and producing its own infantry and artillery weapons. The Vietnamese army are well trained to adopt new weapons and already equipped with submarines, Su-30 MK2 strike fighters, anti-aircraft missile systems, surface-to-shore missiles, radar systems, technical reconnaissance equipment, and armored tank units. There is no specific number given for the standing army and the reserve force in the latest white paper, but Vietnam is importing high-tech and advanced weapons and trying to modernize its military forces.

Vietnam has seen an increase in defense spending, from 2.23 percent of GDP in 2010 to 2.36 percent in 2018, approximately \$5.8 billion. Vietnam's budget on defense is well above the 2

percent of GDP target goal, even above some NATO countries' spending. Vietnam's defense budget is predicted to rise in real terms, as Vietnam's economy has enjoyed growth rates of between 5 and 7 percent for nearly 20 years. But Vietnam does not have a strategy to match the funding boost.

Meanwhile, Vietnam remains a nuclear-free state under the agreement of the ASEAN community. The new document shows that Vietnam also does not want to pursue an arm race. But it is caught in the middle between the broader arms race between China and the United States.

Defense commentators have suggested that the new document shows an opportunity for the United States to collaborate with Vietnam in promoting the mutual interests of the two countries in multilateral defense cooperation. There may be a case for Vietnam to develop further relationships with the United States, but Vietnam is always cautious to balance its relationships with the two major powers, the U.S. and China.

It will be hard for Vietnam to join a U.S.-led coalition dealing with China's aggressive actions over the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, even though the country faces increasing threats to its sovereignty from China's encroachment into Vietnam's exclusive economic zone. Vietnam has been the main country to confront and challenge China in the South China Sea in recent years; the standoff around Vanguard Bank is a recent example. Vietnam has postponed some oil and gas exploration projects in the area, including the exploration operation with Repsol, which ceased in 2017 due to China's aggressive coercion.

Colonel General Vinh Chi Nguyen reaffirmed that Vietnam definitely will not align with one country against another and will not join any military alliance. He argued that countries belonging to a typical alliance "will have to adhere to that union's principles under the leadership of one country, even when they are not entirely compatible with the country" and members of such an alliance will not be independent and have the autonomy to decide things on their own.

In my view, choosing between autonomy and alliance is a false choice, the result of which will be that Vietnam will simply limit itself on defense if and when the country is heavily under attack.

I would argue that the duty and responsibility for one nation to affiliate with other countries on security has become a global consensus that is part of military norms. Following suit would help Vietnam confront issues that it cannot predict in the future. Otherwise, Vietnam cannot make itself resistant to global threats from the Middle East, China's rise, climate change, and the impact of the unpredictable Trump.

Vietnam's choice of partners is particularly important today: Vietnam will hold the rotating ASEAN chair in 2020 and thus hold the ASEAN multilateral naval exercise as well as organize the ASEAN Defense Minister Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus. Vietnam also holds a new nonpermanent seat on the United Nations Security Council and participates in UN Peacekeeping missions. There will be calls for Vietnam to respond to an emergency, offer solidarity, and help uphold partners' interests.

Politics is a brutal business. It is hard to predict and anything can happen: take for example the recent killing of top Iranian General Qassem Soleiman, ordered by Trump, which could now lead the U.S. into war with Iran.

Vietnam is a small nation in Southeast Asia and its defense position remains rather conservative, with the traditional view of “if you strike us first, we will fight you back.” It is urgent for Vietnam to develop the mutual interest to deepen defense cooperation with other partners and not allow issues like the approval of China to be sticking points. Vietnam’s defense relationships with other countries in the region need more effort and cooperation, not less.

For decades, Vietnam’s defense policy was designed on the principle of serving as a neutral bridge between the United States and China. Vietnam had a potential mediating function that was valued in Washington, amplifying Vietnam’s power. And yet Vietnam appears not to have noticed or taken advantage of its potential. It is not too late to adopt a more realistic approach on defense to ensure Vietnam is better protected against China’s rise and escalation of external threats the country faces. It’s time for Vietnam to become an increasingly dynamic regional military power.

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