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Why Vietnam Should Not Go Nuclear

Pursuing a nuclear deterrent against Chinese aggression would undermine the country's international reputation and destabilize relations with Beijing.

By Khang Vu

Since the end of the Cold War, Vietnam has sat in a precarious position, with threats from China increasing on both land and sea. On a like-for-like basis, Vietnam stands little chance of matching Chinese military power. As such, it is natural that some scholars have suggested that Vietnam pursue nuclear weapons in order to balance against China. Nuclear weapons are a great equalizer for weak states vis-à-vis strong states, and would enable Vietnam to deter Chinese aggression once it can no longer engage in a conventional arms race with China.

However, while this argument seems logical, it neglects the history of how Vietnam has perceived the role of nuclear weapons in its security strategy, especially in its relationship with China. Vietnam did have the nuclear option in the late 1970s and 1980s under its alliance with the Soviet Union, during which the Soviets gave Vietnam nuclear-capable missiles, though not nuclear warheads themselves. But the Soviet Union could have supplied Vietnam with the warheads if it decided to and if Vietnam accepted them. Moscow even built shelters for its nuclear submarines in Cam Ranh Bay, which it relied on to patrol the South China Sea. Ultimately, Vietnam opted against hosting Soviet nuclear warheads for one simple reason: it did not want to hurt its relationship with China at a time when both countries were in the process of normalizing diplomatic relations in the late 1980s.

To make a case for not hosting nuclear weapons, Vietnam reviewed the 1978 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union and argued that the treaty did not contain any clauses saying Moscow would be allowed to station nuclear warheads in Cam Ranh Bay. It is also worth reminding that the Soviet Union-Vietnam alliance had lost some cohesion since the mid-1980s due to Soviet economic decline and its own efforts to normalize ties with China. Had Vietnam been keen on nuclear weapons to deter China at all costs, it should have accepted those weapons when its economy was no longer able to maintain a million-man strong conventional army. Vietnam's decision to not go nuclear was vital to its normalization of diplomatic relations with China in 1991.

After its refusal to host Soviet nuclear weapons and the substantial Soviet withdrawal from Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam joined the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone in 1995, under which signatories pledged not to “develop, manufacture or otherwise acquire, possess or have control over nuclear weapons; station or transport nuclear weapons by any means; or test or use nuclear weapons.” Its reason for joining the treaty was strategic – it hoped the treaty would constrain Chinese military options in the region. Vietnam then joined and ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996 and 2006, respectively, which affirmed Hanoi's commitment to nonproliferation. Vietnam has also been a member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty since 1982. It is not an overstatement to claim that Vietnam's decision to not host Soviet nuclear weapons and to participate in the Southeast Asian nuclear-free zone was essential to its reintegration with the international community, a move that North Korea has so far failed to take.

Under this context, Vietnam going nuclear would fundamentally unravel Hanoi's post-Cold War foreign policy of diversification and multilateralization. Pursuing nuclear weapons would immediately tarnish Hanoi's export-led growth strategy due to the international sanctions that would likely result, and would downgrade its international status to that of a pariah like North Korea. It would also hurt Hanoi's legal challenges against Chinese activities in the South China Sea, since Vietnam would also be breaking its commitment to multiple international treaties at a time it needs those treaties to be on its side the most. And these scenarios are not fanciful. Vietnam was indeed a pariah just 40 years ago when it was contemplating hosting Soviet nuclear weapons.

Moreover, it is unclear if having nuclear weapons would increase Vietnam's security. Vietnam should never antagonize China because its security and prosperity depend on a good Vietnam-China relationship. For Vietnam, going down the nuclear path would be a matter of self-defense; but for China, it would be a strong signal that Vietnam harbors aggressive intentions. Nuclear weapons are a cause of stability only when both states have a secured second-strike capability, which Vietnam would not have for a long time after it decided to go nuclear. China would not be shy of carrying out surgical strikes against Vietnam to rid it of its infant nuclear program and prevent Vietnam from having a second-strike capability, as Israel did to Syria in 2007.

Importantly, even if Vietnam successfully gets a second-strike capability at a high cost, it is also uncertain whether it could maintain that capability in the long run considering its weaker economic and technological foundation. China can always carry out a splendid first strike because its missiles are more accurate and numerous, and they are supported by a superior surveillance capability. To protect its second-strike capability, China has managed its nuclear arsenal for at least 50 years while Vietnam has zero experience managing one on its own, which would also raise the risks of accidents if Vietnam ever decided to go nuclear. This is to counter the argument that having a nuclear arsenal could equalize the huge power disparity between Vietnam and China and free Vietnam from a conventional arms race with China.

Even assuming the unlikely scenario that Vietnam has the capability to maintain its second-strike capability, it is not credible for Vietnam to deter Chinese aggression on the South China Sea with nuclear weapons. This is because those islands lack strategic significance to Vietnam's survival and China's attacks against Vietnam's islands are likely to fall below the threshold that would justify a nuclear attack. And even if China launches a ground invasion of Vietnam, Hanoi would still be able to repel it and credibly signal to China without a need for nuclear weapons, much like it did in 1979. In short, nuclear weapons would be both unnecessary and harmful for Vietnam.

Vietnam wants "to be friends with all countries and never to antagonize anyone." For such a policy to work, a commitment to nuclear nonproliferation is a must. Vietnam said no to nuclear weapons in the 1980s when it was in a worse position than it is right now; as such, it can and should do so again.

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