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Why Vietnam's Political Shake-Up Will Not Affect Its Foreign Policy

Two structural constraints, one international and one domestic, ensure a high degree of continuity in Hanoi's external relations.

By Khang Vu

Vietnam's domestic politics is undergoing probably its most significant change since the end of the Cold War, as the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) disciplines senior officials across the board for their mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic. For the first time ever, the president, one of the country's "four pillars," resigned, while the number of officials being investigated for corruption is still increasing. There seems to be no limit to how far the CPV will go to shore up transparency and accountability among its ranks.

With the large number of punished officials hailing from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, many scholars have wondered whether the anti-graft campaign will have any effects on Vietnam's foreign policy, especially given that deputy prime minister and career diplomat Pham Binh Minh is among those who have been relieved of their posts. Many observers have argued that the ongoing anti-graft campaign is targeting technocrats and a supposed progressive faction within the CPV, and that Vietnam's foreign policy will therefore tilt toward Russia and China and away from the United States. **While it is too early to know the domestic ramifications of the current campaign, one thing that can be said for sure is that Vietnam's foreign policy will not tilt in either direction.** This is because of **two structural constraints** on Vietnam's foreign policy, one from the international level and the other from the domestic level.

Vietnam is a rising middle power in the Indo-Pacific, and some scholars have suggested that the country has much agency with respect to its foreign policy. However, the reality is that while Vietnam on its own is a large country in terms of population, it is relatively small when compared to China. Statistically, Vietnam is equal to a single Chinese province. Vietnam's geography constrains its options in two ways. First, it cannot upset China because no external force can come effectively to Vietnam's continental defense. Second, Vietnam must avoid a state of hostility with China for it cannot maintain a high level of defense spending vis-à-vis Beijing due to its much smaller state budget and China can always "bleed Vietnam white." When Vietnam violated these principles, as in the case of its alliance with the Soviet Union, it paid a huge price while still being unable to change the outcomes according to its preferences. Vietnam's foreign policy since the end of the Cold War has thus been centered on one major theme – the search for security in order to reduce its vulnerability with respect to its large northern neighbor.

Such a search for security means Vietnam's options are first and foremost conditioned by China's behaviors toward Vietnam. When China and Vietnam are on good terms, such as in the decade after normalization of relations in 1991, when both sides peacefully settled their land border and the Gulf of Tonkin disputes, Vietnam saw little need for security cooperation with other powers and formally adopted the "Three Nos" of no military alliances, no foreign bases,

and no external alignments, in its 1998 defense white paper. Only when China became more aggressive toward Vietnam in the summer of 2014 did Hanoi really contemplate upgrading relations with the U.S., but even then, it has firmly committed itself to a non-aligned foreign policy. In the absence of any Chinese provocations, Vietnam has no need to change its foreign policy. With the revival of China-Vietnam ties in the aftermath of CPV General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's visit to China in November, there are no signs that either side wants to destabilize the relationship. It is simply irrational for Vietnam to adjust its policy of nonalignment when it is not broken.

The second constraint on Vietnam's foreign policy is imposed by the country's domestic political institutions. Contrary to personalist regimes, where the top executive's personal preferences have a significant impact on foreign policy, Vietnam's collective leadership forbids the rise of any personalities. The 18-member Politburo, not the Foreign Ministry or the state, is the ultimate decision-maker on any foreign policy matters. Each member of the Politburo is subject to CPV discipline and will follow the Party line. Senior Politburo members may be more influential than junior members, but as a whole the Politburo is based on consensus and is structurally resistant to radical changes. And the regularization and institutionalization of the CPV will further strengthen the party as a structural constraint on any particular individual.

Vietnamese officials provide the expertise and serve as the conduits between the CPV and the outside world, but they are under no circumstances institutionally empowered to challenge the CPV's authority. Pham Binh Minh is a case in point. His experience was important to the Politburo's foreign policymaking, but in no way did he hold sway over decisionmaking. From a broader perspective, the continuity of Vietnam's foreign policy can be seen in the absence of any leaders with a clear personal foreign policy platform independent of the Politburo's. Members of the Politburo have changed over the years, but Vietnam's foreign policy since the end of the Cold War remains constant despite assumptions of the existence of "pro-China" and "pro-Western" factions within the CPV. Recent leadership changes are not a harbinger of any major foreign policy changes, because the domestic structure and the power of the CPV remain intact.

To put it briefly, Vietnam as a unitary actor lacks agency at the international level, while Vietnam's diplomats themselves lack agency at the domestic level. Recent domestic political events may suggest that Vietnam's domestic politics is becoming more uncertain, but counterintuitively, the CPV must have been structurally strong enough to be able to get rid of senior officials with so few repercussions for regime stability. With China-Vietnam relations stable and the Politburo firmly in charge, Vietnam's external relations will not see any radical change for the foreseeable future.

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