

# Vietnamese Perspectives on Transnational Security Challenges

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## Key Findings

- Vietnam’s perspectives on security challenges are being shaped by four paradigms: regime security, rapid wealth creation, human security, and national survival.
- The regime security and rapid wealth creation agendas are dominant, but the government is under increasing pressure from forces representing the human security and national survival agendas.
- The major transnational security challenges as perceived by the Vietnamese are those that threaten the values upheld by the four paradigms. These include regime opposition, terrorism, infectious diseases, natural disasters, environmental crimes, climate change, resource scarcity, hazardous cheap products, drug trafficking, and human trafficking. Also of concern are sea attacks and oil spills in the South China Sea, illegal immigration from China, and money laundering.
- As Vietnam pursues two conflicting grand strategies—international integration versus regime preservation—its officials share a thin common view on security challenges, and the government’s perspective suffers from a lack of coherence.
- Microlevel perspectives, stovepiped practices, lack of social responsiveness, and a general tendency to pass the buck to others are prevalent features of Vietnam’s government approach to transnational security issues. However, the reform-minded portion of the media, which still has to operate under state ownership, is playing an important role in mobilizing societal forces and pressuring government agencies toward action.
- With increasing convergence on some strategic interests between the US and Vietnam related to China’s rise, there is greater

potential for closer cooperation, both bilaterally and multilaterally, between the two countries. The areas of greater potential are as various as combating drug trafficking, infectious diseases and terrorism, environment protection, disaster management, enhancing resource security, and coping with climate change

## The Views Behind the Views

In the second half of the 1980s, serious debates emerged within the Vietnamese leadership over the country's security outlook. At first, the debates revolved around the question of "security by what" and not "security for whom." While the focus was state security rather than human security, adherents of "new thinking" argued that security would be more effectively provided by economic means than by military means. This was because the rigid binary structure of a military confrontation between the socialist bloc (of which Vietnam was a member) and the capitalist world had given way to interdependence and globalization. In accordance with their worldview, the new thinkers advocated liberalization inside the country and a more open approach to the outside world. However, old thinkers, clinging to an anti-imperialist doctrine that prioritizes regime stability, feared that such measures would bring in "negative elements"—human, ideological or otherwise—from outside and increase subversive and criminal activities. In response, new thinkers agreed to the need for political stability but maintained that the benefits of international integration would outweigh the costs of transnational security challenges.

While the core debate remained unsettled, the two camps cut a pragmatic compromise. Both economic reform and political stability became the dual linchpins of Vietnamese policies in the era of *doi moi* ("renewal"), which began in the late 1980s. Vietnam's security outlook in the current era reflects the ongoing conflicting visions of anti-imperialism and integration. Two major experiences have defined the main thrust of anti-imperialism and integration since the late 1980s. The first is the experience of an economy on the verge of collapse. This gave rise to integration. The second is the experience of a regime on the verge of collapse. This determined the content of anti-imperialism in the post-Cold War era. After decades of warfare and experiments with a socialist command economy, Vietnam fell into economic collapse in the mid-1980s. This prompted the country's leadership to adopt wide-ranging reforms both in domestic and foreign policies. A main lesson learned was that one

must rehabilitate market mechanisms and join the global mainstream. However, these measures also undermined the communist regime. The Tiananmen Square protests in China and the transformation of communist regimes in Eastern Europe during 1989 provided an object lesson for anti-imperialists in this regard. For the old thinkers, such events could happen because liberal ideas originating in the West had crossed the border and influenced parts of the population, including the elite. The process was called "peaceful evolution" and was identified by anti-imperialists as the primary threat to Vietnam's security in the era of *doi moi*.

Poverty and peaceful evolution are the two traumas that have driven Vietnamese policies in the 1990s and well into the twenty-first century. Correspondingly, the chief objectives of Vietnamese politics in the post-Cold War period have been economic growth and regime preservation, with the latter enjoying a slight primacy throughout most of the period.

The cohabitation of these two paradigms has exerted an enormous impact on how Vietnam's policymakers perceive and manage the transnational security challenges to their country. Integrationists generally favor greater openness with the world and see transnational activities as bringing more good than harm. On the contrary, anti-imperialists tend to emphasize the negative effects of external influence. Hence, security challenges are given different priorities according to whether they are political or socioeconomic in nature. Political security challenges are defined by the authorities as those activities that are directed against the communist regime or undermining the ideological and organizational foundation of the regime. High priority is put on fighting political security challenges, sometimes at the expense of measures to curb socioeconomic security problems. As a result, threats to the communist regime are likely to be seen as more alarming and are met with tougher countermeasures than are threats to the livelihood of the population.

In Vietnam's government agencies, the perspectives of anti-imperialism and integration, along with the underlying values of regime security and rapid wealth creation, continue to prevail over other perspectives. The government is, however, under increasing pressure from two recent developments. First, two decades of limited liberalization have opened up some breathing space for civil society, which, in its function as a corrective to the authorities, emphasizes the values of human security and sustainable development. Second is the perception of a great danger to national survival that emanates from a powerful, assertive, and expanding China. This perception expresses itself more emphatically through civil

society actors but is also present among a large part of the ruling elite when they are in their private capacity. Symbolically, General Vo Nguyen Giap, the only living founder of the socialist republic, is a prominent figure in these emerging forces.

## Major Transnational Security Threats

**Regime opposition and terrorism.** Regime opposition normally is considered an internal threat. But in an age of globalization and with millions of Vietnamese exiled from their country after the communist takeover of South Vietnam, regime opposition has acquired a transnational nature and is arguably the top security concern of the Vietnamese government. A communist state, Vietnam does not allow legal opposition to the government. Even public “critical feedback” (*phan bien*) is not tolerated. With this mindset, Vietnam’s government has an extremely broad view of what it sees as oppositional activities. For example, getting in contact with an exile Vietnamese group that advocates democracy and human rights in Vietnam is seen as a threat to the communist regime. Propagating liberal ideas is also seen by the authorities as a dangerous phenomenon. A medical doctor was arrested and sentenced to five years in prison and three years of house arrest after he translated and posted online an article from the US Embassy website entitled “What Is Democracy?” Missionary activities to create organized communities of faith that are independent from the state are also perceived as threatening. Control of political ideology and control of organized association are two strongholds of Communist Party power. Thus, activities that challenge the regime’s control of these spheres will be watched with the highest vigilance and treated with the harshest methods.

Vietnam has tried to secure the cooperation of foreign governments in fighting its regime opposition. It has reached mutual agreements with noncommunist neighbors such as Cambodia, Thailand, and the Philippines with regard to not allowing dissidents to organize within each other’s territory. Vietnam also took advantage of increased US terrorism concerns to gain support from the United States. While taking US requests to fight terrorism seriously, it also labeled some US-based Vietnamese groups as “terrorists” and requested that Washington do the same. The subtext was simple: If I help you fight your enemy, you must also help me fight my enemy. However, much to the disappointment of Hanoi, Washington refused to reciprocate, stating that these groups were

promoting their opinion peacefully and did not engage in terrorist activities.

**Infectious diseases.** The last two decades have seen Vietnam heavily exposed to a number of pandemic diseases such as the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), and H5N1 (bird flu). More recently, through the country’s human connections with the United States, H1N1 (swine flu) also has been spreading rapidly in Vietnam. Because infectious diseases threaten the well-being of a vast number of the population, the issue is perennial on the watch lists of advocates for human security, rapid wealth creation, and national survival.

HIV was introduced to the country in the 1990s, along with Vietnam’s international opening and economic liberalization. The spread of HIV has been closely related to the sex industry and the narcotics trade, which are considered by Vietnamese as two of the most dangerous social crimes. Despite sustained efforts by authorities, HIV, prostitution, and drug abuse remain acute and widespread. This current reality seems to be attributable to the lack of political will and material resources to fight against these challenges.

SARS was introduced to Vietnam in early 2003 by a businessman flying in from Hong Kong. Within weeks, the disease caused the death of this man and four other people who had contact with him in the hospital. The dramatic loss of life raised public awareness of pandemic health concerns, and the management of this disease provided valuable lessons for the subsequent cases. Drawing upon the lessons learned from SARS, Vietnam was relatively successful in limiting the negative effects of the avian influenza pandemic. The government spent a large amount of money to compensate for farmers’ losses, and there were effective efforts to quarantine the virus. These efforts, according to a senior healthcare official, are the major reasons for the success. However, both the H5N1 and the H1N1 influenza were spreading with high speed over large areas. This was largely because many of the infected (in the case of H1N1) and the affected (in the case of H5N1) did not comply with the quarantine procedures. Lax hygiene practices and the spread of contaminated food are also some of the main causes of recurrent diarrhea outbreaks in recent years.

**Natural disasters, environmental crimes, climate change, and resource scarcity.** These threats, separately or in combination, place Vietnam's natural and material resources and those who depend on them in a precarious position. The issues are placed high on the human security and national survival agendas. While these challenges do not directly threaten the ruling regime's security, they pose a challenge to the rapid wealth agenda. However, the long-term nature of the above issues (except natural disasters) ensures that they are not a high priority on the rapid wealth creation agenda, which is characterized by its short-term sight and its role in contributing to these threats.

Tropical storms and floods are the two major types of natural disasters in Vietnam. Every year, a dozen typhoons come from the South China Sea and ravage the country's most populous areas. On sea, the typhoons pose a recurrent existential threat to thousands of Vietnam's small and ill-equipped fishing boats. On land, heavy rains cause floods and landslides, while strong winds damage or destroy cities and villages. These problems have been exacerbated in recent years by an economic expansion that often included the leveling of lakes and the burning of forests to make way for new urban, mining, and agricultural areas.

Vietnam has a well-developed system of coordination among governmental agencies at all territorial levels to deal with flooding and storms. Recently, a national committee for search and rescue, with the military as the lead agency, has also been set up. The political will is, however, often compromised by poor equipment, corrupt officials, and a limited budget. For example, damage caused by storms has been made more severe by the poor capacities of Vietnam's state-owned weather forecasters.

While Vietnam's rapid economic development in recent decades has dramatically raised the wealth of the nation, it also has placed a huge stress on the environment. Parallel with the mushrooming of industrial factories is the dramatic increase of chemicals that are discharged into the soil and the air. In the race for fast profit, most factories do not comply with the law and instead shift the environmental costs to their surrounding areas. One popular case is the decade-long pollution of the Thi Vai River in Dong Nai Province by a food factory supported by foreign investment. There is also increased media coverage about "cancer villages," where significant numbers of villagers are killed by strange cancers after a factory is built in the neighborhood. The overuse of chemicals in manufacturing, agriculture, and food processing has become widespread in

recent decades. In addition, Vietnam's water and forest resources are being rapidly diminished by the expansion of mining, hydropower, logging, land development, and other industries.

According to the World Bank, Vietnam is one of the five countries most threatened by climate change. Experts have estimated that a one-meter rise in sea level would result in 10 percent of Vietnam's population being displaced and 4.4 percent of the country's territory—including 90 percent of rice fields in the Mekong delta—being permanently submerged. If the sea level were to rise one meter, Vietnam's largest city, Ho Chi Minh City, which is now home to eight million inhabitants, would lose half of its current area, while one-third of the Vietnamese portion of the Mekong Delta, which is home to eighteen million people, or 22 percent of Vietnam's population, also would be inundated. Although Ho Chi Minh City accounts for nearly 30 percent of Vietnam's industrial output, the Mekong Delta produces half of Vietnam's rice and more than a quarter of its gross domestic product (GDP). The rise in sea level, combined with economic expansion in Greater Mekong, has already caused water scarcity for Vietnam and other countries in Lower Mekong. Food insecurity and massive migration are expected if this issue is not effectively dealt with.

**Hazardous cheap products.** Few countries would identify hazardous products as a major transnational security challenge. But in Vietnam, the abundance of cheap, poor-quality but products, mostly of Chinese origin, has become a security concern. These goods include foods, garments, chemicals, and other products containing a high level of toxic preserving agents, formaldehyde, and other hazardous ingredients used to drastically reduce the costs of production. Another type of hazardous product is the equipment of an older technological generation that produces low-quality goods at a high environmental cost. These products are sold at incredibly cheap prices and have been conquering large segments of Vietnam's domestic market. The issue of hazardous cheap products, most of which are imported or smuggled from China, is high on the human security and national survival agendas, which see these products and their flooding of the domestic market as a danger to Vietnamese consumers, producers, and the environment. However, proponents of regime security and rapid wealth creation view things differently. Hazardous products do not pose a direct threat to the regime. Rather, they have helped many Vietnamese enterprises, both state-owned and private, in their race for quantity and



speed, which is pursued regardless of quality and long-term consequences. For years, the Vietnamese government has suppressed complaints about the overabundance of hazardous, cheap products from China. Nor have the authorities done anything significant to improve quality control and border protection against the smuggling of these products. The issue was only recently (i.e., 2009) brought to larger public awareness. But after a Chinese Embassy counselor intervened with the Vietnamese Ministry of Information and Communications, Vietnam's state-controlled media stopped calling attention to the issue. The counselor noted that the opinions voiced by some Vietnamese newspapers were "unfriendly" to China and needed to be controlled. Vietnam, having formally pledged to be a "good neighbor, good friend, good comrade, good partner" of China, is under pressure to behave faithfully to its pledge.

**Drug trafficking.** Several factors have made Vietnam a key transit point in the global network of drug trafficking routes. These include the country's proximity to the Golden Triangle, a world center for narcotic production; the long and porous land borders with Laos, a large supply market, and with China, a large consumer market; and the ethnic Vietnamese connections with the advanced industrial countries, which also is a large consumer market.

Vietnam is also a destination for drug traffickers. Drug abuse has become a widespread phenomenon not only in urban areas but also in the countryside, affecting all strata of Vietnamese society. The drug issue is placed high on the human security agenda. However, the authorities' handling of this issue remains ineffective. A common excuse is that authorities lack finance, equipment, and personnel. But from an alternative perspective, factors such as corruption, the lack of political will, and the lack of effective interagency collaboration present major hurdles in coping with drug abuse and trafficking.

**Human trafficking.** Vietnam has been at a crossroads of people ever since human memory. Today, human trafficking is a pressing threat to security in the country. Young women, men, and boys are the major targets of the traffickers. Young women in poor families with poor education are especially vulnerable to traffickers who pretend to broker jobs for them in larger cities or abroad. Many women then are sold and forced to become

sex workers, mostly in China, Cambodia and the larger cities of Vietnam, but also in Macau, Thailand, and Malaysia. Tens of thousands of Vietnamese women have been sold as wives to Chinese men, mostly in rural areas, where the men are incapable of finding local wives. Traffickers also lure young Vietnamese men and sell them across the borders to illegal factories that use captive workers in China, mostly brickworks factories, where they work like slaves. Men sold to illegal factories are typically chained so they cannot escape.

Because of its one-child policy and the popular preference for male children, China is also a big market for the trafficking of young boys and babies from neighboring Vietnam. In the areas bordering China, this has created a serious security threat to young boys, male babies, and their families. The media have reported cases in which traffickers murdered an entire family in order to take the newborn and young boys across the border, where they would be sold at a high price. Despite the authorities' efforts, the issue of human trafficking remains intractable. Typically, traffickers are local people who know the victims very well. Like the traffic of drugs, the illicit trade of women in Vietnam is usually organized in pyramid schemes. Many victims become conduits in the network and, trying to make profit from their local knowledge, return to their home villages and lure their own recruits. This creates a hard nut for the authorities to crack as victims become culprits and are fearful of revenge. In other situations, women are sold to remote areas, where local authorities are unable to identify the women's origins.

## Approaches to Dealing with the Threats

The centralized bureaucratic nature of the Vietnamese government augments the challenge of dealing with transnational security issues created by the competing priorities within Vietnamese society. The role of government, as conceived by the ruling Communist Party, is to supervise and manage (*quan ly*) society. The government is differentiated into various ministries and branches (*bo nganh*), each of which is supposed to take control of a distinct sector in society. The mindset and the structure of this "control by sector" approach have promoted microlevel perspectives and stovepiped practices in government agencies.

On the other hand, control by sector has created large overlaps in jurisdiction and vast no-man's lands, since many social and natural phenomena affect different areas and do not pay respect to bureaucratic

categorization. This is especially true of transnational security challenges, which by nature are irrespective of borders. Stovepiped practices, overlaps, and no-man's lands can be balanced by coordination mechanisms, either ad hoc or institutionalized. But the Vietnamese government has an acute lack of these mechanisms.

One way to overcome these problems, then, is for the highest levels of government, that is, the prime minister, or alternatively, the politburo of the Communist Party, to deal with the issue at hand. However, only high-priority issues of the regime security and rapid wealth creation agendas—such as regime opposition, infectious diseases, and natural disasters—are likely to reach these levels.

Low-priority issues are more likely to land in no-man's land. For example, when illegal laborers from China were spotlighted in the media in 2009, no government agency assumed responsibility. The minister of labor said her ministry was in charge of only one part of the whole phenomenon, while the key to solving the issue lay elsewhere. As illegal Chinese workers do not directly challenge the communist regime or pose an immediate threat to economic development, they normally are off the radar of the coalition of anti-imperialists and integrationists that form Vietnam's government. These illegal workers became a security issue only when people looked at them from a different perspective. This different perspective came to the fore via a nascent civil society.

Civil society channels its voice to the public mostly through the reform-minded vein of the state-sanctioned media. Thus, newspapers such as *VietNamNet*, *Tuoi Tre (Youth)*, *Thanh Nien (Young People)*, *Saigon Tiep Thi (Saigon Marketing)*, *Phap Luat Thanh Pho (Ho Chi Minh City Law)*, *Lao Dong (Labor)*, and *Tien Phong (Vanguard)* have become unofficial mouthpieces of the human security and national survival agendas. Typically, these newspapers spotlight the issue, mount a publicity campaign, and try to elicit a response from the officials. Several issues related to environmental crimes have made their way to the prime minister through this approach.

## International Cooperation

Vietnam's international cooperation on transnational security is most intensive with its neighbors—Laos, Cambodia, and China—as well as with a few industrial countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and South Korea. Vietnam has a thick history of cooperation with Laos and

Cambodia, and its ties with Laos are the strongest. Vietnam has signed several government-level agreements with Laos and Cambodia on cooperation in fighting transnational security challenges. In addition, Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security annually signs a detailed cooperation plan with its Laotian and Cambodian counterparts. These regional agreements provide a solid framework for cross-border collaboration and foster cooperation in fighting regime opposition, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and goods smuggling. These four issues also top the list of transnational security cooperation between Vietnam and China.

However, Sino-Vietnamese cooperation on transnational security issues still lags far behind that of Vietnam and its two other neighbors. With Australia, the United Kingdom, and South Korea, most of the cooperation is focused on fighting drug trafficking, illegal immigration, and money laundering. Vietnam is also developing transnational security cooperation with other ASEAN countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Indonesia.

Many factors determine the intensiveness and effectiveness of international cooperation on transnational security issues. The intensity of cooperation depends on the level of threat and the resources available to the related countries, as well as the partner-friendliness of their approach. Drug and human trafficking, money laundering, and infectious diseases in Vietnam are concentrated in movements between neighboring countries and along ethnic connections. Due to this nature, bilateral cooperation often trumps multilateral cooperation on these issues. One reason Australia and the United Kingdom maintain the best cooperation with Vietnam on transnational security is due to the high value of human security in their overall security perspective, their resources, and the flexibility and patience in their dealings with the partner country. With their sizable ethnic Vietnamese communities, certain countries such as Germany, Russia, the Czech Republic, the United States, and Canada also share significant transnational security issues with Vietnam, including drug trafficking, human trafficking, and money laundering. However, cooperation with Eastern European countries is less intensive due to lack of resources. In Germany, Canada, and the United States, progress has been hampered either by the incompatibility of their approaches or the interference of political interests.

The effectiveness of international cooperation largely depends on how the partners manage their asymmetries of power. According to Vietnamese

officials, it is much easier for Vietnam to put forward its initiatives in cooperation with Laos and Cambodia than with China. And while Vietnam is more ready to cooperate when China proposes initiatives, China is harder for Vietnam to persuade. This may be explained by the fact that less powerful countries tend to defer to the more powerful. This principle also holds true for Vietnam's cooperation with advanced industrial countries. Power asymmetries and the principle of "deference to the powerful"—which is entrenched in the foreign policy culture of Asian countries—are the main culprit for hindering regional cooperation on transnational security issues. One burning issue that has been largely silenced is the negative impact (e.g., resource depletion, water scarcity, food insecurity, and environmental degradation) caused by dams in the Upper Mekong countries, mostly China. Other transnational security issues that recently have stirred great anxiety in Vietnam include oil spills and sea attacks in the South China Sea, but these have little chance of making their way to the policy agenda due to power asymmetries and the deference principle.

### **Implications for the United States**

Historically Vietnam's cooperation on transnational security issues with the United States has concentrated on combating drug trafficking, money laundering, terrorism, and pandemic diseases. The intensive human connections between the two countries have made cooperation on these issues necessary. However, with each country championing an opposite ideology and political system, security cooperation remains a sensitive issue that demands keen attention and delicate approaches. The situation has begun to change for the better as the two countries' strategic interests have converged in maintaining the status quo in the regional balance of power, and in the face of increased Chinese assertiveness, Vietnam has gained more strategic value in US foreign policy.

Vietnamese officials have indicated that their government would welcome the strengthening of cooperation in protecting against a wide range of threats, including drug and human trafficking, infectious diseases, money laundering, terrorism, environmental pollution, and climate change. Both Vietnam and the United States see poverty and lack of education as root causes of drug and human trafficking and infectious diseases. US assistance can be used to help Vietnam expand education, training, and microfinance programs, especially in rural areas. International partners can help Vietnam with material and ideational

resources for communication programs that aim at enhancing popular awareness, knowledge, and discipline regarding pandemic diseases and environmental pollution. The United States also can effectively assist Vietnam with community healthcare. US experts, volunteers, equipment, and medicine may provide a valuable force to prevent and fight pandemic outbreaks.

Other areas that appear promising for US-Vietnam cooperation include disaster management, environment protection, and coping with climate change. More specifically, Vietnam has dire need of international support to assist with training, equipping and sharing information in weather forecasting, training and joint exercises in search and rescue, and waste treatment in urban and industrial areas. To date, the United States and Vietnam have taken initial steps in cooperation for search and rescue, weather forecasting, and environment protection.

Wartime legacies still linger and hamper cooperation between the United States and Vietnam. In 2009 President Barack Obama signed a bill that doubled US assistance to US\$6 million for dioxin cleanup efforts and related health activities. Agent Orange, or dioxin, a chemical that US forces used for defoliation missions during the Vietnam War, has contaminated the soils surrounding its storage and application sites and has affected a large number of Vietnamese, along with American and South Korean troops and their descendants. Until now, Vietnam has used the issue for propaganda purposes, and the United States has acknowledged only limited responsibility. However, with genuine political will from both sides to overcome the past and look to the future, the two countries can transform a blighted historical legacy into a mutually favorable opportunity for cooperation. Recent US initiatives for closer cooperation with the Lower Mekong countries—Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand—in the areas of the environment, health, education, and infrastructure development, have signaled a new stage and raised great hope for stronger transnational security.