

Vietnam's National Security Architecture



By Alexander L. Vuving

Alexander L. Vuving is a professor at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official guidelines or position of DKI APCSS, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

Overview of Vietnam's National Interests

In Vietnam's policy discourse, the concept of national interests is sometimes used in distinction from the interests of particular social classes and sometimes in contrast to ideology. The discourse has witnessed in the decades following the Cold War's end a steadily increasing emphasis on the national interest that implies that national interests should trump class interests and ideology if there is a conflict between them. This emphasis also gave rise to a broader sense of national interests understood as encompassing the needs for survival and development of the nation that are recognized and pursued by national leaders as the fundamental objectives of national policy. In this sense, national interests subsume ideological concerns and reflect the interests of both the ruling class and the nation at large. This chapter uses the term "national interests" in this broader sense.

Key policy documents in Vietnam occasionally speak about "the highest interests" of the country. Throughout the reign of the Communist Party, these interests are identified as "building socialism and defending the socialist Fatherland." In more specific terms, they include economic development, protection of the socialist state, independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Entering the post-Cold War era, in July 1992, the Central Committee of Vietnam's ruling Communist Party (VCP) passed two resolutions that set the guidelines for the country's foreign and security policy in the following years. These resolutions stated, "the highest and most sacred interests of our nation as well as our working class is to successfully build socialism in our country and firmly protect the socialist Fatherland, to protect our independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, to achieve rapid socio-economic development, and to make the people rich and the country strong."¹ In July 2003, in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the VCP Central Committee issued a new national security strategy that updated previous strategies to the new global situation. This strategy, usually referred to as Resolution No. 8 of 2003, identifies "industrialization and modernization with socialist orientation" as the central goals,

¹ Hong Ha, "Tình hình thế giới và chính sách đối ngoại của ta" [World Situation and Our Foreign Policy], *Tap chi Cong san* [Communist Review], December 1992.

and “maintaining a peaceful and stable environment for socio-economic development” as the “highest interests of the Fatherland.”² These ideas were endorsed again in the most recent national security strategy, Resolution No. 28, which the VCP Central Committee adopted in October 2013.

Maintaining a peaceful environment for economic development is Vietnam's core security interest throughout the *doi moi* (renovation) era that began in 1986 and is still ongoing. “Maintaining the Peace, Developing the Economy” is the title of the May 1988 VCP Politburo Resolution No. 13, the national security strategy document that laid the foundation for Vietnam's new foreign policy in the *doi moi* era. An examination of the most authoritative political documents and statements of key Vietnamese leaders suggests that in addition to peace for development, freedom of action, territorial integrity, and regime preservation are the core security concerns and interests of the Vietnamese state.

Vietnam's national interests are a complex set of goals that reflect the views of VCP leaders on the best interests of the ruling party in its relations with the populace and foreign powers. The ultimate interest is the protection and maintenance of the Communist Party's rule. In the views of VCP leaders, this entails primarily rapid but sustainable socio-economic development, the preservation of the socialist regime, a peaceful and stable domestic and international environment, national independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.

Vietnam's Definition of National Security

The most authoritative definitions of Vietnam's national security can be found in the political platforms of the VCP, the political reports of the VCP national congresses, and the VCP Central Committee's and Politburo's resolutions on national security strategy. Regarding the core objectives of national security, both the 1991 and the 2011 VCP Platforms emphasize protecting national independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, safeguarding the socialist regime, political stability, social order and safety, and crushing all plots and actions of forces hostile to the VCP's cause.

Vietnam's national security is often described with the concept of “Fatherland protection” (*bao ve To quoc*). The Political Report of the 8th VCP Congress in 1996 explained this concept as comprised of “firmly safeguarding the country's independence, security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, protecting the people, the Party, and the socialist regime.” The later VCP congresses broadened the concept to include elements such as protecting social order, national culture, and the cause of *doi moi*, while independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and regime preservation consistently remain the core interests. The July 2003 national security

² Ban Tu tuong-Van hoa Trung uong [VCP Central Commission on Ideology and Culture], *Tai lieu hoc tap Nghi quyet Hoi nghi lan thu Tam Ban chap hanh Trung uong Dang khoa IX* [Documents for Studying the Resolution of the 8th Plenum of the 9th Party Central Committee] (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 2003), pp. 15, 48-49.

strategy stated and the October 2013 national security strategy reiterated that the main objectives of national security include the protection of national independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity; the security of the VCP, the state, the population, and the socialist regime; the protection of the cause of *doi moi*, industrialization and modernization; the protection of national interests; the maintenance of political security and social order; the protection of the national culture; and the maintenance of peace and stability for socialist national development.

The broadening of the contents of “Fatherland protection” reflects a tendency to make national security ever more comprehensive. Regime and state security are interwoven with societal, economic, human, and even cultural security in a complex manner. This comprehensiveness notwithstanding, leaders have to prioritize to focus. In a speech that gave guidance to members of the VCP Central Committee in March 2014, VCP General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong summarized the central political goals of the national leadership as “resolutely safeguarding national independence, national sovereignty, and territorial integrity, protecting the Party and the regime, and maintaining a peaceful and stable environment for national development.”

Major Security Threats and Concerns

Vietnam's security challenges encompass a broad menu of issues ranging from the South China Sea disputes to regime opposition, from trafficking in persons and narcotics to climate change, and from environmental disasters to public health crises. Four set of issues stand out as the major security concerns.

The South China Sea Disputes. Territorial and maritime disputes with China in the South China Sea pose the largest challenge to Vietnam's sovereignty and territorial integrity. China and Vietnam's overlapping claims in the Sea include the Paracel Islands, the Spratly Islands, and most of Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) off the Central Vietnamese coast. Vietnam and China engaged in two naval clashes, at the Paracel Islands in 1974 and the Spratly Islands in 1988, which killed a total of 138 Vietnamese sailors and resulted in Vietnam's loss of the Paracels and China's occupation of 6 reefs in the Spratlys. It is worth noting that these two were the only “naval battles” in the history of the People's Republic of China. In 2007, after a decade of relative calm, tension started to rise in the South China Sea. In 2014, China's unilateral deployment of the giant HYSY-981 oil rig into Vietnam's EEZ sparked the worst crisis in Sino-Vietnamese relations since 1988. The completion of China's island-building in the Spratlys in 2016 has tilted the local balance of power decidedly in favor of China. An indication of this new asymmetry of power is the fact that in 2017 and 2018, under Chinese pressure, Vietnam had to suspend two oil drilling projects in the deep south of its EEZ.

Regime Critics and Opposition. Vietnam's Constitution guarantees the Communist Party's one-party rule and does not allow legal opposition to the government. The

Party has a broad view of what it sees as oppositional activities, ranging from criticism of the regime to action against it. Propagating “wrong views” about the regime, its institutions, or its leaders may be seen as “propaganda against the state,” a criminal offense chargeable under the Criminal Code. Regime critics and political dissidents who pose a threat to regime legitimacy are considered threats to national security, as are riots and subversive action aimed at overthrowing the regime.

Natural and Environmental Disasters and Climate Change. Tropical storms and floods are the 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 cities and villages. These problems have been exacerbated in recent decades by an economic expansion that often included the leveling of lakes and the burning of forests to make way for new urban, industrial, and agricultural areas. Vietnam's rapid industrialization, while raising the wealth of the nation, 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 air, the soil and the waters. In the race for fast profit, most factories do not comply with the law and instead shift the environment costs to the surrounding areas. According to the World Bank, Vietnam is one of the five countries most threatened by climate change. Sea level rise would inundate large areas of Vietnam's Mekong Delta, which produces half of Vietnam's rice, and Ho Chi Minh City, which accounts for nearly 30 percent of Vietnam's industrial output. Hydroelectric dams in the upper and middle Mekong River region worsen the situation by dramatically changing the ecosystem and adversely affecting the livelihood of population groups living from the river.

Trafficking in Narcotics and Persons. Vietnam's proximity to the Golden Triangle, a world center for narcotic production; its long and porous border with Laos, a large supply market; and with China, a large consumer market, has made the country a major transit point in the regional network of drug trafficking routes. Drug abuse has become a widespread phenomenon both in the urban areas and the countryside, affecting all strata of Vietnamese society. Human trafficking is another pressing threat to human security in Vietnam. Young women 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 large cities or abroad. Tens of thousands of Vietnamese women have been forced to become sex workers or sold as wives to Chinese men, mostly in rural areas, where the men are incapable of finding local wives. Typically, traffickers are local people who know the victims well or who gain their trust through online communication. Like the traffic of drugs, the illicit trade of women in Vietnam is often organized in pyramid schemes. Some 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.

Vietnam's National Security Architecture

The structures and processes of security decision-making in Vietnam differ in terms of the nature and the significance of the issues. While routine and less important issues are expected to be coordinated by a line agency whose purview covers the issue at hand, decisions over “sensitive” or strategically important issues are made at the top echelon of the party-state. The highest decisionmaking authority in Vietnam rests with the National Congress of the Vietnam Communist Party, which meets every five years; the VCP Central Committee, which usually meets twice a year; and the VCP Politburo, which meets once about every month.

On a daily basis, decision making takes place in a hierarchy with the General Secretary of the VCP at the top position, flanked by the Standing Secretary of the Central Committee on the party side and the Prime Minister on the government side. The General Secretary and the Standing Secretary are aided by the Office of the Party Central Committee; the Prime Minister by the Office of the Government. Generally speaking, these offices are information hubs rather than coordinating centers; they are no equivalents of the national security council. They handle the communications between the top leaders and the line agencies; sometimes, when necessary, they also coordinate among the participating organizations, but research and formal policy recommendations on national security issues are expected to come primarily from the line agencies rather than these offices.

For issues related to state and regime security, there are interagency mechanisms that involve the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of National Defense, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For some important non-traditional security issues, there are special national committees or central steering committees that coordinate relevant agencies. Some well-established committees are put under the roof of a lead agency and rely on the lead agency's bureaucracy, such as the Central Steering Committee for Natural Disaster Prevention and Control under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and the National Committee on Search and Rescue (VINASARCOM) under the Ministry of National Defense. Other committees are headed ex officio by a deputy prime minister, respectively. Currently, a deputy prime minister is head of the National Committee for AIDS, Narcotics, and Prostitution Prevention and Control and the Central Interagency Steering Committee on Food Hygiene and Safety, and another deputy prime minister leads the Steering Committee for the National Program on Response to Climate Change. These committees rely on the Office of the Government for administrative support.

For other issues, the line agency will serve as the lead for interagency consultation and policy coordination. If the issue needs higher authority to be dealt with, the lead agency can bring it to a government meeting or request the Prime Minister's decision. If existing policy does not permit dealing adequately with an issue, the issue can be brought to the Politburo or the Party Central Secretariat for guidance. The National Assembly, which is regularly convened twice a year, is another high forum for deliberation and consultation on national security issues, but its Standing

Committee, which meets once a month, as well as the Office of the National Assembly, which handles day-to-day business, have little role in decision making or policy coordination.

Vietnam's national security architecture is centralized but diffuse and not focal. It is centralized in that decision making on important issues rests with the top leadership. It is diffuse and not focal in that there is not a single focal point or a few focal points that coordinate the processes of assessment, consultation, communications, and implementation. The Office of the Government and the Office of the Party Central Committee serve as conduits and gatekeepers for communications with the top leaders—the VCP General Secretary, the Prime Minister, and the VCP Standing Secretary—but the lead of policy coordination varies widely according to the issue at hand.

Security decision making in Vietnam is not personalized but it is not highly institutionalized either. Although top leaders are the receiving ends of the important national security issues, they work on the principle of collective leadership and usually make decisions based on consensus. At the same time, mechanisms of interagency coordination and collaboration remain thin and superficial, leaving much space undefined. This architecture allows for flexibility at the operational level while guaranteeing rigidity at the strategic level. Operations are flexible because there is little institutionalization in terms of who does what with whom. But strategy remains rigid because decisions to revise or change policy guidelines have to gather broad bases for consensus. Decision making based on consensus can rally more legitimacy and support but is unsuited for crisis management and a rapidly changing and unpredictable environment.

The lack of a core national security hub combined with the diffuse nature of policy coordination creates vast no-man's lands between the stovepipes of line agencies. Since many security challenges do not pay respect to bureaucratic categorization, this poses a big challenge to Vietnam's national security architecture.

Conclusion

Vietnam has a centralized but diffuse national security architecture, which is low on both personalization and institutionalization. Decisions on important national security matters often reflect the consensus among the top leaders, especially the VCP General Secretary, the Prime Minister, the VCP Standing Secretary, and other key members of the Politburo, including the State President and the National Assembly Chair. At a lower level, national security policy is shaped primarily by the special views of the line agency with purview covering the issue at hand. The lack of a core national security team that is specialized in national security analysis and stands above special agency interests prevents the institutionalization of foresight and strategic thinking, as well as coherent policy coordination. On the positive side, however, the architecture allows flexibility and diversity at the operational level, thus contributing to the resilience of the overall policy ecosystem.