
VIETNAM

THE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

As Southeast Asia's second most populous country, Vietnam can be regarded as a middle-sized power within this region. However, it is a small power in terms of the broader Asia Pacific region and is of negligible importance as a security actor on the world scene as a whole. Since the end of the Cold War, its strategic importance to the large powers has declined. Because of this, Vietnam has little capacity to shape the external aspects of its security environment. Rather, the challenge for Vietnam is to adapt to changes in its environment in ways that enhance its economy and bolster its security.

In the long years of struggle to regain independence and unification, Vietnam saw hostile outside forces as its main security challenge and military power as its principal instrument for dealing with this challenge. But recently a new definition of security challenges and policies has taken hold. In a fundamental shift in thinking, Vietnamese leaders have fully embraced the notion of "comprehensive security." The closing of the economic gap between Vietnam and other regional countries currently is perceived as Vietnam's biggest security challenge. Although average economic growth in the 1991-95 period averaged 8.2 percent annually, Vietnam remains one of the region's poorest countries in per capita income terms. Since other regional countries also are developing rapidly, Vietnam will remain relatively poor for many years to come.

Vietnam also faces fierce international competition as it liberalizes its economy and integrates itself into the region and the world. The acceleration of globalization processes, led by the telecommunication and information revolutions, impose enormous strains on society and can lead to social and political disorder. In this respect, excessive red tape, corruption and other "bureaucratic evils" constitute a major challenge for the government as they hamper the reform process and erode people's trust in and support for the regime.

Externally, land and sea territorial disputes present a continuing source of security concern, particularly in light of Vietnam's current economic and military weakness. The disputes over sovereignty of the Hoang Sa (Paracel) and Truong Sa (Spratlys) archipelago are complex and unlikely to be resolved in the near future. Actions by other countries could further complicate these disputes, delay resolution and endanger Vietnam's security and sovereignty as well as regional stability.

The firm conviction that protection of sovereignty is essential to national welfare and prosperity remains a legacy of the years of struggle for freedom and unification. The Vietnamese remain very sensitive to any form of foreign intervention by large countries in the internal affairs of Vietnam and will contest and reject outside attempts to dictate Vietnam's policies.

Vietnam faces a daunting set of security issues, including closing the economic gap. Nevertheless, there is growing confidence that Vietnam can meet these challenges based on the mobilization of total national strength, including military, diplomatic, and socio-economic efforts.

DEFENSE POLICIES AND ISSUES

Defense Objectives. In its efforts to regain independence and achieve unification in the face of opposition from much larger and stronger foreign powers, Vietnam essentially based its defense doctrine on the strength of all of the people and the combining of armed struggle with political struggle. In fact, Vietnam's war effort was a people's war, combining three types of forces—the professional army, the regional armies, and the militia and self-defense forces.

In peace time, Vietnam's defense objectives have shifted to firmly safeguarding national independence, security, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the nation's social order. The new doctrine consists of several important elements:

- Simultaneous implementation of two strategic tasks: national economic construction and national defense.
- Close coordination of defense and foreign policies and an increased role for diplomacy in securing a peaceful environment.
- Consolidation of the all-people's national defense, that is, the strength of the entire system and all the people is to be enhanced and mobilized to safeguard national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and internal stability.
- Increased emphasis on building well-trained, modern professional armed forces, while establishing an adequately trained reserve, military, and self-defense corps.
- Strengthened Communist Party leadership over the armed forces and national defense.

Defense Modernization and Personnel. Vietnam's weaponry is generally old and some of it obsolete by modern standards. During the Cold War, China

and the then Soviet Union were the main sources of military assistance for Vietnam, but now Vietnam must finance its own military modernization. With a gross national product of only about \$15 billion and the priority in government spending being given to the economy, Vietnam's modernization efforts must proceed gradually. By all accounts, Vietnam's current defense spending is lower than that of any other ASEAN member country.

To increase the effectiveness of its limited defense spending and improve professionalism, Vietnam has reduced the size of its standing armed forces in recent years by roughly fifty percent. Defense enterprises are being transferred to a new management system and will be evaluated in socio-economic as well as defense terms. The size and quality of reserves will be increased.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO REGIONAL AND GLOBAL SECURITY

Given Vietnam's new defense doctrine and limited defense effort, Vietnam believes it is not a threat to neighboring countries nor a factor in the regional balance of power. The country contributes to regional and global security by providing for its own order and security and through its diplomatic efforts to strengthen its relations with neighboring countries. In the past five years, priority has been given to normalization and deepening of relations with its neighbors. Vietnam is also participating in the building of multilateral institutions. Notably, Vietnam acceded in 1992 to the 1976 ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Concord and in 1995 formally joined ASEAN. During the same period, Vietnam succeeded in normalizing and improving its relations with China and the United States.

Vietnam attaches great importance to building good neighborly relations with Laos and Cambodia. The special Vietnam-Laos relationship has not only been consolidated but developed to a new stage on the basis of equality, mutual respect, and common interest. Vietnam wants Cambodia to be a peaceful, neutral, and non-aligned country with friendly relations with all regional countries. Although there are outstanding bilateral problems, such as the border dispute and the status of Vietnamese residents in Cambodia, the two countries have agreed to settle such issues through peaceful negotiations. Vietnam strongly supports the entry of Cambodia and Laos into ASEAN in 1997.

Vietnam is committed to the peaceful settlement of international disputes. While repeatedly affirming its sovereignty over the Paracels and Spratlys, Vietnam has declared that it will pursue its claims through peaceful means. Vietnam has been participating in the Indonesian-sponsored informal meetings on the South China Sea and supported ASEAN's Manila Declaration of 1992

calling for a peaceful resolution of disputes. It has expressed its opposition to unilateral actions that have fostered tensions in this region.

The concept of confidence-building measures is still new to Vietnamese policymakers. Traditionally, as in most countries, defense matters were carefully guarded secrets. However, as a member of ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Vietnam is deeply involved in regional security dialogues. It is considering how it can contribute to regional peace, stability, and prosperity through concrete measures that enhance mutual trust. Vietnam has begun exchanges of military delegations and dialogues with regional countries including China, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. It recently joined the non-governmental Council for Security Cooperation in Asia Pacific (CSCAP) and has been studying the question of publishing a defense white paper in the future.