DEFENSE DIPLOMACY: VIETNAM'S NEW APPROACH FOR NATIONAL SECURITY

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Abstract. The paper examines how Vietnam’s defense diplomacy following a multidirectional and diversified approach works in order to maintain and increase national security and strategic interests since the beginning of the 21st century. In doing so, it aims to clarify conceptual and practical aspects of military diplomacy. In the area of national defense policy, Vietnam strives to ensure stability not only of bilateral relations but also of the strategic environment of the region for the national security and territorial integrity. Furthermore, Vietnam’s defense diplomacy aims to deal with the traditional security issue of sovereignty over the East Sea, thereby maintaining economic development and regime legitimacy. This paper concludes that Vietnam seeks to use defense diplomacy in order to preserve its strategic autonomy in facing security challenges caused by major international powers.

Keywords: Defense diplomacy, military cooperation, national interest, security.

1. Introduction

Defense diplomacy is a specific area of diplomacy which concentrates primarily on the pursuit of foreign policy interests of the state in the field of security and military policy [1; p.179; see more in 2, 3, 4]. Historically, military cooperation and assistance have largely been used in the framework of international realpolitiks, balance-of-power politics which aim at pursuing narrowly-defined national interests. According to realism, states build defense cooperation with or provide military aid to other states in order to counterbalance or deter enemies, create/maintain a sphere-of-influence, support friendly regimes in suppressing domestic opponents or gain commercial interests [2; p.7]. However, in the era of post-Cold War, defense cooperation has been employed not only in its longstanding realpolitik role of supporting the armed forces and security of allies, but also as a “soft” tool of pursuing broader foreign policy objectives. It is thus possible to distinguish between the old concept of defense diplomacy, which focuses on countering enemies, and the new one with its emphasis on engagement with potential enemies, support for democracy, good governance and human rights, and enabling states to address their own security problems [2; p.8].

For Vietnam, the 11th Communist Party Congress (2011) marked an important shift in the Party’s external relation thinking when calling for the proactive and active comprehensive integration in terms of economy, politics, defense, society, culture, education, etc. In January 2016, Vietnam’s Cabinet approved the Overall Strategy for International Integration Through 2020, Vision to 2030 affirming that Vietnam must make greater efforts to enhance defense and
security relations with partners, firstly strategic and comprehensive partners; proactively and actively participate in multilateral mechanisms on defense and security, especially within or led by ASEAN [5]. By doing so, Government of Vietnam (GoV) approaches the new concept of defense diplomacy which reflects a multidirectional approach aiming for independence, sovereignty and national interests. Previous studies on Vietnam’s foreign relations focus on the choice of multilateralism and international economic integration [6, 7], specific issues of territorial disputes, or bilateral relationships with other countries [8]. Some scholars concern with Vietnam’s bilateral defense cooperation [9, 10] or put much focus on Vietnam’s military capacity enhancement in dealing with East Sea disputes [11, 12]. Still, there is a lack of independent studies which analyze comprehensively Vietnam’s defense diplomacy as a part of multilateral and diversified foreign policy. This paper therefore fills a major gap in studies concerning Vietnam’s foreign policy under Doi Moi by providing a comprehensive and detailed analysis of how Vietnam approach the new concept of defense diplomacy since the start of 21th century.

This paper aims to analyze the policy of defense diplomacy which follows a pragmatic approach of multilateralization and diversification. The first part of the work deals with the definition of “defense diplomacy” as it has emerged since the 1990s through formulating its main aspects and characteristics. The second and third part examine why and how defense diplomacy has been employed in Vietnam as well as its role for national security. For reasons of space, I will focus on Vietnam’s defense ties with major powers including the United States, Russia, India, China and Japan, and the utilization of ASEAN’s multilateral settings for security cooperation.

2. Content

2.1. Defense diplomacy: a conceptual framework

Scholars argue that defense diplomacy is hardly seen as a new phenomenon emerged in international politics. Since the age of conventional warfare, the use or threatened use of military force to gain foreign-policy goals has been a main feature of the international system [13; p. 253]. Such coercively oriented use of military power to achieve foreign-policy objectives, however, is beginning to appear a rare phenomenon in the post–Cold War period. Since then, a new form of defense diplomacy is becoming increasingly more common as militaries and their defense ministries undertake a growing range of external peacetime cooperative tasks [2; p. 6]. This new kind of defense diplomacy first gained prominence following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe [4]. The UK, for first time, puts forward the most comprehensive concept of defense diplomacy in the 1998 Strategic Defense Review which make defense diplomacy one of eight core missions of British defense policy. The British concept involves three elements: an outreach program of cooperation with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe; defense diplomacy activities in other parts of the world; and arms control, non-proliferation and confidence-building [2; p.11].

The new form of defense diplomacy is defined as a wide range of activities carried out mainly by armed forces and their defense ministries, as well as other state institutions, whose actions are based on the use of negotiations and other diplomatic instruments [1; p.179]. In practice, it suggests that, besides the traditional role as an instrument for the use of force, militaries and defense ministries also work as a tool for cooperative peacetime engagement with other states. This new defense diplomacy is implemented for various reasons, such as their own interests, logistical capacity, network of military attachés and the similar culture that ease connections and conversations with their counterparts in other countries [14; p.5]. Regarding international relations, one of its primary objectives is to provide a low-cost, low-risk “continuation of dialogue by other means” and further lessen the possibility of conflict occurred between former and potential enemies [13; p.254]. According to Cottey and Forster (2004), 74
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various activities including exchange of high-level defense related visits, dialogue on security challenges and port calls, officer exchanges, ship visits, training missions, provision of military equipments and other military aid, and joint military exercises have all been denoted as practices of defense diplomacy [2]. They also argue that, the new kind of defence diplomacy runs alongside the old one. It is thus important to distinguish between defense and coercive diplomacy. Defense diplomacy attempts to establish partnerships between international actors through security cooperation, the use of defense related programs, and does not aim to threat or force its partners into cooperation. Meanwhile, coercive diplomacy seeks to influence the behavior of other international actors through utilizing the military strength, the threat of force, or the use of limited military action, thereby reflecting hard power in international relations [2, 15]. In doing so, the new defense diplomacy aims at “building mutual trust via dialogues and exchanges among military organizations to achieve stable bilateral and multilateral relations and regional security” [12; p. 43].

2.2. Vietnam’s adoption of defense diplomacy

Some scholars argue that, several years ago, defense diplomacy was never indeed featured in regional discourse and policy in Southeast Asia, nor was it officially adopted by specific regional governments [13; p.254]. However, the significant rise of defense diplomacy has been experienced in this region during the past decade. Vietnam's adoption of defense diplomacy as the key part of its comprehensive integration strategy has been rational choice given its historical experiences, domestic conditions, changes in its external foreign policy, as well as the international environment.

The priority of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) in foreign relations is to gain its national interests with three primary goals: economic development, security and enhancing the country’s position in the international arena. The objectives of defending national security, preserving its sovereignty, and territorial integrity are always put on the top concerns for maintaining and boosting the regime stability and legitimacy in the period of Doi Moi. To achieve these aforementioned objectives, Vietnam has adopted the policy of “diversification and multilateralization of foreign relations” to “become a friend to all countries in the world community” and to implement the motto of “more friends, fewer enemies” [16; p. 403]. Multilateralization and diversification have become the basic points of Vietnam’s foreign policy since the Seventh Congress of the Communist Party (1991), during which the CPV decided to build and expand relations with countries having various political and social systems [7]. This policy further contributed to “enhance Hanoi’s sense of security after the collapse of the Soviet Union: having more friends means having fewer enemies” [17; p.112]. Subsequent National Congresses of the CPV endorse Vietnam’s foreign policy of openness, multilateralization and diversification of international relations, proactively integrating into the world and participating in the process of regional and international cooperation. Historical lessons of forming an alliance with the Soviet Union, partner choice based on ideology-based rationales during the 1970s and 1980s also motivate Vietnam to adopt the “Three Nos’ Policy” (Ba “Khong”) (no military alliances, no foreign military bases on Vietnamese territory, and no reliance on any country to oppose others). Hanoi understands that the best way to protect its independence and interests, or to maximize its strategic maneuver room is not to ally with or over-depend on any power [10]. To this end, multilateralization and diversification of foreign relations are to connect the interests of all major powers in the country, therefore avoiding the scenarios of overly relying on any particular power and safeguarding its independence of actions as well as political autonomy [18;p.88-89].

In term of international context, Asia-Pacific has been the world’s most dynamic developing region but many "hot spots" in the Middle East, East Asia, and South Asia continued to stand at
stalemate, running the risk of explosion. Disputes over territorial sovereignty,sea, islands and natural resources, and non-traditional security issues such as environmental pollution, water security, cyber security, migration, terrorism, transnational crimes, infectious diseases are threatening the security and stability of many countries, including Vietnam. Even though, these challenges have provided a broad foundation for a majority of states to join in internationally cooperative activities and projects. So, the Resolution of 11th National Party Congress adopted in January 2011 stated that the Asia-Pacific, including Southeast Asia, will “contain many underlying factors which possibly lead to instabilities. More disputes on territory, sea and islands will occur” [19; p.96].

Both the National Defense White Paper (2009) (Sach Trang Quoc phong) and the Political Report of the 11st Party Congress (2011), for the first time, identified new threats to national security including non-traditional security threats and territorial disputes, thereby requiring more international cooperation, especially in the area of defense. In addition, disputes on territory, sea and islands are increasingly become a salient challenge in Vietnam’s foreign relations. It was not until 2007, that East Sea disputes became a domestic issue, which is increasingly attached to Vietnam’s economic development and the regime legitimacy [17; p.115-116]. Vietnamese government is coping with the most challenging question of “how to preserve its sovereignty and political autonomy while maintaining stable, peaceful and beneficial relationships with powerful neighbouring China” [18; p. 89]. An armed conflict with any state, especially neighbouring countries, will probably threat the foreign policy objectives of “maintaining a peaceful environment and creating favorable conditions for the reforms” which have been continuously mentioned in all Political Reports of Party Congresses since 1986. This principle has been reflected clearly in the National Defense White Paper: “Vietnam always puts the maintenance of peaceful and stable environment for socio-economic development, industrialization and modernization, building the socialism-oriented market economy on the top national interests, and the consistent goal of its national defense policy” [20; p.11]. In this new context, Vietnam’s adoption of multidirectional defense diplomacy aims at establishing security cooperation relations with various countries in and outside of the region, thereby balancing the influence of great powers on Vietnam and increasing its self-confidence in dealing with territorial disputes.

Following the State’s strategy to actively integrate into the international community, and to protect national security and integrity in the new context, the Viet Nam People’s Army (VPA) has pursued a comprehensive policy of defense diplomacy, strengthening international integration in this field. However, Vietnam’s current explanation of the defense diplomacy concept has just mentioned clearly in the most recent defense White Paper published by Ministry of Defense in 2009. Its chapter on national defense policy includes two sections: “Fundamental Issues of the National Defense Policy”; and “Military Diplomacy and Security Cooperation.” This suggests that Vietnam attaches high importance to military diplomacy in national defense policy [20; p. 18-30]. Also, the White Paper refers military diplomacy as a key component of multidirectional and diversified diplomacy with an aim to develop security and cooperative relations with “all” countries. “Defense diplomacy is a critical part of the state’s diplomacy,” and “the goal of defense diplomacy is to establish and develop defense relations with all countries based on equality and mutual respect” [20; p.23]. Defense diplomacy has to actively contribute to “maintain a peaceful and stable environment,” and promote regional cooperation. Practically, Vietnam’s Deputy Defense Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh affirmed that “Military diplomacy, through the combination of national defense and diplomacy, contributes to national territorial sovereignty and integrated defense, and is a priority strategy for defending the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the fatherland to ensure that war does not break out.” [c.f. 12; p.52].
2.2.1. Bilateral defense diplomacy

Vietnam has bilateral strategic and comprehensive partnerships, including defense and security cooperation, with twenty-five countries. Recently, the VPA has built defense relations with over 80 armed forces. There are Vietnam’s defense attaché offices established in 34 countries and 45 countries have opened their defense attaché offices in Vietnam. In recent years, among them, the US, Russia, India, Japan, China represent the major powers that Vietnam is most concerned with.

Bilateral defense cooperation between Vietnam and the United States was insignificant after the normalization of relations declared in July 1995. However, since the period of Obama’s administration, this cooperation has been impressively upgraded. The US-Vietnam defense ties recently are defined by strategic-level discussions, exchanges, joint exercises, and capacity-building. In particular, Vietnam and the US have diversified and deepened their cooperation against the backdrop of the changing situation over the East Sea issue [12; p.48]. Two sides signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Advancing Bilateral Defense Cooperation in 2011, and Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations in 2015 sketching areas and forms of cooperation. The first form of Vietnam-US security cooperation is strategic dialogue. In August 2010, the first annual Defense Policy Dialogue at deputy defense minister level was inaugurated [21; p.37]. At the seventh US-Vietnam Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue held in Hanoi in January 2015, the two countries reiterated they would continue to strengthen cooperation in the fields of maritime security, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction [21; p.40]. Secondly, Vietnam actively welcomes the visits of regular US Navy port in Vietnam and joint exercises. The US military presence in Vietnam has been growing steadily, with the holding of annual Naval Engagement Activity (NEA) in Vietnam since 2010 and the Pacific Partnership humanitarian assistance mission of the US Forces visiting Vietnam as part of its activities biennially in 2010, 2012, and 2014 [12; p.48]. It is worth highlighting that, in October 2010, the United States became the first country to subscribe to the Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung’s announcement of opening Cam Ranh Bay port facilities for all foreign navies. The transport vessel Richard E. Byrd and four vessels of the US Navy were maintained and repaired in Cam Ranh Bay in August 2011 and June 2012, respectively. Thirdly, the US has provided Vietnam military assistance of USD 18 million to enhance the capacity of its Coast Guard units, and 40.1 million USD for the purchase of maritime defense equipment [21; p.37-38]. The US’s military assistance also includes opening English language courses for military officers, training activities for UN peacekeeping operations, defusing sea mines and bomb disposal, etc.

In recent years, Vietnam has steadily strengthened the defense cooperation with Japan, especially in maritime security, which exemplified by its welcoming the Japan Maritime vessels, co-organizing strategic security dialogues and conclusion of military agreements. In 2011, Vietnam and Japan signed an Action Plan to implement the strategic partnership sketching out a Plan of Action including the reciprocal opening of Defense Attaché Offices, and the inauguration of an annual Defense Policy Dialogue at the deputy defense minister level [22]. A MOU on Bilateral Defense Cooperation and Exchange providing wide ranging defense cooperation activities is also concluded in this year to set the legal framework for cooperation between the two countries’ coast guards. The Japan–Vietnam “Extensive Strategic Partnership” for Peace and Prosperity in Asia was concluded in a 2014 joint statement by President Truong Tan Sang and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, which aims at tightening bilateral relations in all fields including security-defense and economics. In particular, two sides affirm their shared intention of further strengthening defense and maritime cooperation [22; p. 536]. Since 2013, five high-level defense policy dialogue have been conducted. Military assistance for the modernization and capacity
building of Vietnam’s maritime enforcement agencies has been seen as a priority in bilateral defense cooperation because regional maritime security is the two countries’ current security interest. In the framework of Joint Vision Statement signed in 2014, Japan affirmed its continued assistance to support Viet Nam to boost its capacity of maritime law enforcement agencies, address post war unexploded ordnance clearance and participate in UN peacekeeping operations. In 2015, Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida offered Vietnam six second-hand patrol vessels to the Vietnam Coast Guard and training to enhance its maritime capacity. In this year, Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force was accepted for visiting Cam Ranh International Port and hold their first training exercises. The two sides have cooperation in information and technology education, training courses on a search and rescue. In May 2016, the two countries discussed another deal of newly-built patrol vessels for further capacity enhancement of Vietnam’s maritime security department. During a visit to Hanoi in January 2017, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe confirmed this provision of brand-new boats valued totally at USD 338 million for Vietnam’s coast guard. The first joint exercise was held between the Japanese Coast Guard and the Vietnamese Maritime Police of Da Nang for Vietnam’s capacity enhancement to deal with illegal fishing activities by foreign vessels, in June 2017 [c.f. 11: p.91].

Vietnam is consistently active in strengthening security cooperation with its longstanding partner, India and considered cooperation in national defense as an important pillar in Vietnam-India strategic partnership. Two countries signed a Memorandum on Defense Cooperation (2007), and Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations (2015) in which define quite comprehensive defense cooperation activities including high-level exchange visits, an annual security dialogue, service-to-service interaction, professional military education and training, naval port visits, ship construction and provision of spare parts, training and capacity building, assistance in maintaining military equipment, defense co-production, multilateral exercises (humanitarian assistance/disaster relief and search and rescue), and cooperation at regional forums such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus. These agreements have led to mutual visits of dignitaries taking place more frequently. India’s defense minister visited Vietnam in December 2007 and October 2010. Vietnam’s minister of national defense visited India in November 2009. India’s Chief of Army Staff visited Hanoi in February 2008 and July 2010. Vietnam’s Chief of Navy visited India in 2011, while the head of the Vietnam Coast Guard visited India in September 2013. Additionally, Vietnam has sought India’s assistance to modernize its armed forces through providing credit for vessel purchase, naval training facilities and assist in military capacity building. India has fast emerged as one of Vietnam’s major defense industry partners. For example, India is currently upgrading Vietnam’s Petya-class light frigates for anti-submarine warfare. India has also provided service programs to improve and better all Vietnamese stocks of military equipments, including thermal sights and fire control systems for armoured vehicles, T-54 and T-55 tanks, and M-17/MI-8 helicopters, which were supported by Soviet Union in the past. Also, India has offered to sell Light Combat Helicopters and heavyweight torpedoes to Vietnam and the deal of the BrahMos ruise missile are discussing [21; p.33]. India’s provision of arms, equipment, spares, technology and services develops Vietnam’s ability to modernize its armed forces and strengthens its capacity for the repair and maintenance of air and naval platforms. In doing so, Vietnam’s defense relations with India aim to reducing its near total defense dependency on Russia or China [9].

In addition to promote defense cooperation with new actors, Vietnam continues to upgrade the partnership with traditional partners including Russia and China. Being strategic partners, China and Vietnam have organized and enhanced a dense network of party, state, defense and multilateral mechanisms to conduct and manage their relations. Two countries continue to hold high-level contact and implement defense cooperation activities such as border defense exchanges,
strategic defense dialogues, joint naval patrols on the Tonkin Gulf and along the land border [21; p.33]. Vietnam-Russia Strategic Partnership further elevated to the comprehensive strategic level in 2012 comprises institutionalized mechanisms for fostering bilateral cooperation in all fields, most notably defense cooperation. Vietnam and Russia concluded a military cooperation pact to formalize bilateral defense cooperation in 2009, then a five-year MOU and an agreement on bilateral cooperation in military technology until 2020 in 2013. This MOU covers many forms of cooperation including annual defense dialogues; military technology; professional military education and training assistance in military equipments maintenance, upgrading and repair; joint venture service and the sale of jet fighters [21; p.27]. From 2008 to 2016, their defense ministers exchanged five visits. The two sides organized three Defense Strategic Dialogues at deputy-defense ministerial level. One of the critical aspects of Vietnam-Russia military diplomacy is equipment procurement and human resource development. Russia is currently the largest supplier and transfer of weapons as well as modern military technology for Vietnam, accounting for around 80 per cent of its arms purchases [23; p.26]. Since 2009, six Kilo-class submarines and four Gepard 3.9 (Project 11661E) frigates configured for anti-submarine warfare have been delivered to Vietnam. Also, Russia has offered hundreds of defense scholarships and an expansion in the fields of military training for Vietnamese military personnel. In this regard, military diplomacy plays a critical role in implementing Vietnam’s capacity enhancement objective for national security and sovereignty.

2.2.2. Multilateral defense diplomacy

Vietnam currently attaches high importance to multilateral military diplomacy within ASEAN. ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) have held annually an average of 15 formal and informal meetings between 2000 and 2009 involving defense and security officials at various levels to particularly discuss many security issues [13; p. 251]. The Vietnam defense sector has actively brought up the issues of common concerns in defense-related forums and participates in confidence-building process in international and regional forum. In this regard, ASEAN has provided Vietnam a platform to advance its interests, address issues relating to its national security despite the association’s structural weaknesses associated with a consensus principle and divergent interests/positions of other members on critical issues such as the South China Sea dispute [18; p.92]. Vietnam has involved deeper, more substantially, especially in the ASEAN-organized settings such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), the Conference of ASEAN Defense Ministers+ (ADMM+), and the ASEAN Chiefs of Police Conference (ASEANPOL). ARF remains one of Vietnam’s principal tools of strategic engagement and confidence building with extra-regional powers and other ASEAN members. ARF includes the ARF Ministerial Meeting, the ARF Senior Officials’ Meeting, the ARF Intersessional Group on CBMs, the ARF Security Policy Conference (ASPC), the ARF Heads of Defense Universities/Colleges/Institutions, and the ARF Defense Officials’ Dialogue (DOD).

Since Vietnam hold ASEAN’s chair in 2010, the country has engaged in active diplomatic actions calling for an ASEAN statement expressing unified and strong concerns over the tensions in the South China Sea at the ASEAN meetings [24, 25, 26]. In doing so, the country strives to fend off pressure from a larger power as China by placing the territorial disputes on the agenda of multilateral dialogues [12; p. 52]. The country has also proposed and hosted a Meeting of ASEAN Chiefs of Security Agencies (MACOSA) and initiated the expanded ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM-plus), thus promoting the key role played by ASEAN in making regional peace, stability and cooperation.

3. Conclusion

This paper has traced the evolution of Vietnam’s defense diplomacy expanding from bilateral
to multilateral levels. The changed strategic context creates more opportunities for Vietnam to engage in extensive defense diplomacy and participate in military cooperation programs with a diverse number of new partners, especially great powers. Moreover, Vietnam’s pursuit of multilateral defense diplomacy has been attributed to its historical lessons, domestic conditions, especially changes of foreign policy, as well as the concern over China’s rise, in order to protect its foreign policy objectives, national sovereignty and shape its stable security environment. On bilateral level, Vietnam has sought to stabilize the bilateral defense relationship by building mutual confidence via joint exercises, and coordinated patrols a series of exchanges, such as exchanges between senior officials and joint naval patrols… Vietnam has shown strong eagerness to develop even closer relations with the US as well as strengthen relations with Japan, Russia, India and China, which reflects its ambition for balancing strategy. On multilateral fora, Vietnam confidently shows its clear attitudes and perspectives on disputable issues relating to national sovereignty and regional security. This pragmatic approach of defense diplomacy helps Vietnam to initiate highly specific military modernization programs with a focus on system upgrades and new procurements, as well as to maintain its strategic autonomy, self-confidence in dealing with security challenges.


REFERENCES


