



# VIETNAM'S PROACTIVE FOREIGN RELATIONS

Ramses Amer

*In the post-Cold War era, Vietnam has been successful in expanding relations both regionally and globally. And whereas China remains a strategic challenge for Vietnam in the South China Sea, Hanoi has sought to defuse tensions and remains reluctant to side with other major powers to try and balance China. Ramses Amer argues that this is a lesson Vietnam has learned from its past experiences in dealing with major powers, with Vietnam eager instead to pursue a "proactive" approach to its foreign relations aimed at expanding and deepening collaboration with other countries.*

In 2014 Vietnam has expanded and deepened its collaboration with major powers such as India, Japan, and the United States. Vietnam has also continued its active participation in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Also notable is Vietnam's engagement in the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). The only prominent relationship in which Vietnam encountered significant problems was with China. In fact, the tension relating to China's dispatch of a drilling rig to areas to the west of the contested Paracel archipelago in the beginning of May this year was the deepest and also longest period of tension in their bilateral relations since the 1990s. The crisis and related tension only subsided after China announced the withdrawal of the rig in mid-July.

## Drilling Rig Incident and its Aftermath

The crisis and tensions related to the drilling rig attracted regional and international attention with the United States and Japan criticizing China. Regionally Vietnam turned to ASEAN, but did not request or expect ASEAN to publicly criticize China. This was reflected in the official ASEAN position on the matter. Among individual ASEAN members the Philippines—with its own problems with China in the South China Sea—was the most vocal in supporting Vietnam. Vietnam both presented and interpreted the international reaction as largely sympathetic to its stand in the dispute with China. Less positive for Vietnam were the riots targeting foreign companies in central and southern Vietnam; they were widely presented as anti-China, but mainly affected factories operated by Japanese, Singaporean, South Korean, and Taiwanese investors. The riots not only had a further negative impact on relations with

China, but also created negative reactions from other affected countries such as Singapore. The longer-term impact on Vietnam's capacity to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) from other countries in East and Southeast Asia remains uncertain. Given that the main countries of origin for FDI in Vietnam are from these regions, a decline in FDI would be a worrisome development for Vietnam. Interestingly, despite the riots, investment from China to Vietnam increased in 2014 according to figures released in early December.

Prior to the drilling rig incident, there had been no tension between Vietnam and China in the first four months of 2014. In fact, this had been the prevailing situation since mid-2013. The period mid-2013 to April 2014 was characterized by deepened bilateral co-operation and by a then seemingly successful bilateral dispute management approach. However, the drilling rig incident and related tension showed that the dispute management approach was insufficient to handle the crisis, in spite of the fact that the two countries had continuously kept lines of communication open during the crisis.

Following the withdrawal of the drilling rig the two countries have initiated a process aiming at rebuilding trust, at normalizing the overall relationship, and at addressing the territorial differences. This has been reflected in bilateral interactions highlighted by the meetings between Vietnam's President Truong Tan Sang with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in Beijing on November 10, and between Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and his Chinese counterpart Li Keqiang on the sidelines of the ASEM Summit held in Italy in October. Also in October Vietnam's Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh visited China, as head of a delegation for talks with his Chinese



counterpart Chang Wanquan. Later the same month the Seventh meeting of the Steering Committee for Bilateral Cooperation was held in Hanoi. Notable in the latter case was that China's top Diplomat State Councillor Yang Jiechi headed the Chinese delegation.

This bilateral diplomacy is aimed at re-establishing the cooperative relationship between the two countries following the drilling rig crisis. Vietnam's leadership evidently strives to build a co-operative and mutually beneficial relationship with China. However, this does not stop Vietnam from officially complaining about Chinese actions in the South China Sea, most recently in response to China's Position Paper on "the Matter of Jurisdiction in the South China Sea Arbitration initiated by the Philippines."

## Relations with Other Powers

In relation to other major powers it should come as no surprise that Vietnam relations with India continue to deepen as the two countries have continuously enjoyed good relations ever since the Cold War Era. This has created a relationship in which Vietnam considers India to be a friendly country and which, unlike China, albeit the latter being Vietnam's major trading partner and ideologically closer to Vietnam than India, is not seen as a major geostrategic challenge by Vietnam.

Relations with Japan continue to deepen and expand. This is logical given the fact that Japan is not only a major trading partner and an important source of FDI to Vietnam, but also a major source of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA). Vietnam also appreciates that Japan has supported Vietnam's stand against China during the drilling rig crisis. However, this should not be understood as Vietnam seeking to align itself with Japan or offering public support to Japan in the Sino-Japanese dispute.

Vietnam's relationship with the United States attracts considerable attention due to the legacy of the Vietnam War and also the economic embargo imposed by the United States in response to Vietnam's military intervention in Cambodia in late December 1977. Following the normalization of relations in 1995 cooperation between the two countries has gradually expanded with the collaboration in the military field attracting widespread attention. In 2014 during the drilling rig crisis with China, Vietnam welcomed the position taken by the United States, as it was widely understood as being critical of China's actions. There has also been speculation that Vietnam might try to balance China off by moving closer to the United States. The decision

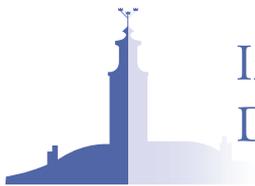
by the United States to partially lift its weapons embargo against Vietnam reinforced such speculation. Nevertheless, Vietnam has thus far been reluctant to move too close to the United States in particular vis-à-vis China.

Vietnam's relations with Russia, furthermore, continue to expand and the importance of the relationship to Vietnam was highlighted by the visit to Russia by the Secretary General of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Nguyen Phu Trong, in late November 2014. Reportedly, during the visit the two countries signed an intergovernmental agreement easing restrictions on the entry of Russian military vessels into Cam Ranh Bay.

## Understanding Vietnam's Foreign Policy

To properly understand Vietnam's foreign policy it is necessary to take into account the context of Vietnam's experience since World War Two with three major militarized conflicts, i.e. the three Indochina Conflicts, covering most of the period up to 1991. Vietnam suffered not only from massive foreign military intervention by the colonial power France, but also by the main super power the United States. It was also caught-up in the Sino-Soviet conflict. Vietnam fought hard to resist the interventions by major foreign powers and it also learned the danger of being caught in disputes between both major powers and superpowers. The experiences and lessons learned are still very relevant today as Vietnam try to manage relations with major foreign powers. This explains why Vietnam is keen not to take sides in major power disputes such as between China and Japan, and also not to take sides in the rivalry between China and the United States.

In sum, in the post-Cold War era Vietnam has been successful in expanding relations both regionally and globally. Vietnam has been proactive rather than merely reactive in the sense that Vietnam has taken advantage of opportunities created within East and Southeast Asia to expand collaboration bilaterally and to integrate into regional structures, e.g. ASEAN. Accordingly, Vietnam seeks to develop good relations with all countries on the basis of mutually beneficial cooperation. This policy has been remarkably successful in the post-Cold War era, notwithstanding territorial issues, most notably with China in the South China Sea, which have at times complicated but not fundamentally derailed relations. Indeed, as its major trading partner with close political ties and multifaceted collaboration, managing tensions with China will also remain central to Vietnam's foreign policy.



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