

# Vietnam's Omnidirectional Military Diplomacy: Focusing on the South China Sea\*

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## Abstract

This paper examines Vietnam's security policy with a focus on its omnidirectional military diplomacy. The concept of omnidirectional military diplomacy combines the ideas of omnidirectional diplomacy—the basic foreign policy of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the Vietnamese government—and the military diplomacy of the Ministry of National Defense and the Vietnam People's Army. Under Vietnam's omnidirectional military diplomacy, in order to build multilayered and stable relationships with all countries, not only the diplomatic institutions but also relevant military organizations participate in broadly-defined diplomatic activities through dialogue and cooperation, thereby playing a part in Vietnam's omnidirectional diplomacy. In the area of national defense policy, Vietnam pursues stability not only of bilateral relations but also of the strategic environment of the region as a whole by engaging in confidence building among relevant military organizations for the security of Vietnam, a relatively small country. Vietnam's omnidirectional military diplomacy seeks to address the traditional security issue of sovereignty over the South China Sea by directly applying the general goal of military diplomacy, namely: improving bilateral and multilateral relations as well as the regional strategic environment through cooperative confidence-building efforts, primarily in nontraditional areas. It attempts to keep China's excessive influence from reaching Vietnam by deepening the country's relationships with the United States and other major powers in the region. Vietnam's omnidirectional military diplomacy principally covers the United States, Russia, India and Japan, and also places importance on the utilization of ASEAN's multilateral frameworks for security cooperation.

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## Introduction

This paper examines Vietnam's security policy with a focus on its omnidirectional military diplomacy. The concept of omnidirectional military diplomacy combines the ideas of omnidirectional diplomacy—the basic foreign policy of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the Vietnamese government—and the military diplomacy of the Ministry of National Defense and the Vietnam People's Army. Omnidirectional military diplomacy constitutes one of the key policies of Vietnam's national defense policy, and receives significant weight in Vietnam's overall foreign policy. In putting forward this concept, this paper gives clarity to the significance of Vietnam's

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military diplomacy, particularly its omnidirectional orientation. In addition, it contextualizes this concept within Vietnam's broader relations with other countries, and explores the concept's meaning for the security policy of Vietnam. This paper aims to analyze the characteristics of Vietnam's security by examining the military-diplomacy overlaps in military diplomacy.

This paper uses the prime example of the South China Sea issue and Vietnam's responses to it to study the application of Vietnam's omnidirectional military diplomacy. Vietnam faces a breadth of security issues not necessarily limited to the South China Sea, including issues in nontraditional areas such as the economy, climate change, and food security.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, however, the South China Sea issue has indisputably taken on further importance for the security of Vietnam. This is the direct result of China's increasing advancement into the South China Sea and confrontations with Vietnam. Particularly from around 2009, China's South China Sea policy has become more assertive and at times more aggressive. Due to dramatic enhancements in China's maritime law enforcement capacity, as well as naval assets deployed to the South China Sea, China has considerably strengthened its monitoring activities to secure its rights and interests in the South China Sea. This has fueled Vietnam's concerns over sovereignty and security, especially over China's enhanced fisheries management. Leading to this situation were a string of incidents in which Chinese surveillance ships interfered with the activities of Vietnamese fishing vessels operating near the Paracel Islands, fishing vessels were seized, fishermen were detained over a long period, their ships were confiscated, and at times, they were requested to pay compensation. In May 2014, the two countries had a fierce standoff over China's establishment of an oil rig near the Paracel Islands over which Vietnam and China have competing claims.

As a matter of fact, Vietnam does not have many effective strategic options for addressing the South China Sea issue, given the country's absolutely asymmetric relationship with China, the "northern giant." In the face of these severe constraints, Vietnam perceives and utilizes omnidirectional military diplomacy as an effective tool. It is of course not without its limits. In this regard, examining the nature of omnidirectional military diplomacy as it relates to the South China Sea issue will help shed light on the key elements of the current security situation of Vietnam.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 1 presents a conceptual study of omnidirectional military diplomacy. It construes that this concept refers to the overlapping areas of the military and diplomacy subsets. It examines military diplomacy and omnidirectional diplomacy, respectively, and then explores the meaning of omnidirectional military diplomacy. Section 2 elaborates on Vietnam's efforts to enhance maritime defense capabilities as an example of its response to the South China Sea issue, and identifies the significance of omnidirectional military diplomacy to complement these efforts. Section 3 outlines Vietnam's relations with the United States, Russia, India and Japan and describes the role of ASEAN to illustrate the aspects of omnidirectional military diplomacy. Section 4 discusses the relationship between Vietnam's military diplomacy toward China and the South China Sea issue, as a manifestation of the omnidirectional orientation of omnidirectional military diplomacy. It examines the confrontations between the two countries over China's oil drilling in May 2014. This paper concludes that while the oil-rig incident is providing an impetus to altering Vietnam's omnidirectional military diplomacy, this represents not

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<sup>1</sup> Tran Truong Thuy and Nguyen Minh Ngoc, "Vietnam's Security Challenges: Priorities, Policy Implications and Prospects for Regional Cooperation," Eiichi Katahara ed., *Security Outlook of the Asia Pacific Countries and Its Implications for the Defense Sector* (Tokyo: The National Institute for Defense Studies, 2013), p.96.

a strategic shift in the omnidirectional orientation encompassing China. Rather, it was Vietnam's tactical response to gradually shift the focus of the countries covered by omnidirectional military diplomacy to other countries outside of the region including the United States, while upholding its basic stance toward China.

### **1. National Defense Policy and Omnidirectional Diplomacy: What is Omnidirectional Military Diplomacy?**

Like other concepts of the social sciences, various views have been postulated regarding the general definition of "military diplomacy" in the context of national defense policy. The features of military diplomacy that cut across the views are: (i) use of military forces and military assets other than military operations; (ii) pursuit of broadly-defined diplomatic objectives; (iii) security through constructive engagement; and (iv) confidence building leading to conflict prevention and resolution.<sup>2</sup> Taken together, military diplomacy can be defined as building mutual trust via dialogues and exchanges among military organizations to achieve stable bilateral and multilateral relations and regional security.

What, then, is meant by Vietnam's omnidirectional military diplomacy? An explanation of the closest concept is found in the most recent defense white paper published in 2009. Its chapter on national defense policy is divided into two sections: 1. "Fundamental Issues of the National Defense Policy"; and 2. "Military Diplomacy and Security Cooperation." That military diplomacy is identified as one of the two themes of national defense policy of major interest suggests that Vietnam's security policy places significant importance on military diplomacy.<sup>3</sup>

In the white paper, it is stated that, "Vietnam consistently realizes the foreign guideline of independence, autonomy, equality and cooperation; seeks to broaden its international relations; and practices omnidirectional diplomacy," "Military diplomacy is a key part of the state's diplomacy," and "The goal of military diplomacy is to establish and develop defense relations with all countries based on equality and mutual respect."<sup>4</sup> The white paper specifies that military diplomacy is a critical component of omnidirectional diplomacy, and military diplomacy aims to build security and cooperative relations with "all" countries. In this regard, Vietnam's military diplomacy is in essence "omnidirectional." To begin with, the trend toward multilateral security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region lies in confidence building through dialogues and cooperation within ASEAN-centered frameworks, and has an omnidirectional nature that is different from alliance-based "partner and potential threat" and "they and we" distinctions. In this sense, there is consistency in the policy of Vietnam—a member of ASEAN and a proactive participant in the multilateral security cooperation framework of ASEAN.

Omnidirectional diplomacy encompassing military diplomacy has become the basic policy of Vietnam's foreign policy since the Seventh Congress of the Communist Party (1991), during which the Communist Party of Vietnam decided to build and expand relations with countries having various political and social systems, and is identified as an important foreign policy that contributes to the Doi Moi (reform) program adopted at the Sixth Congress of the Communist

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<sup>2</sup> David Capie, "Structures, Shocks and Norm Change: Explaining the Late Rise of Asia's Defence Diplomacy," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol.35, no.1, (April 2013), pp.3-5.

<sup>3</sup> Bo Quoc phong, Nuoc Cong hoa Xa hoi Chu nghia Viet Nam, *Quoc phong Viet Nam*, Ha Noi, 2009, tr. 18-30.

<sup>4</sup> *Sach tren*, tr. 23.

Party (1986).<sup>5</sup> The reason Vietnam's diplomacy pursues an omnidirectional approach has a historical basis. Toward the end of the Cold War in the 1980s, Vietnam had a tense confrontational relationship with China, as well as cooling relations with the West including the United States. Faced with these circumstances, Vietnam sought to survive as a nation by forming an alliance with the Soviet Union. However, with Soviet assistance proving to be inadequate, Vietnam became isolated internationally and found itself in a difficult position, both politically and economically. From this experience, Vietnam came away with the lesson that a foreign policy that makes a sharp distinction between them and we based on alliances and adversarial relations was not in alignment with Vietnam's national interests. Particularly with China, Vietnam should be developing bilateral relations premised on their absolutely asymmetric relationship; "if Vietnam, a small country, has a fully confrontational relationship with China, it would find itself powerless domestically and internationally." This presented an extremely unfavorable situation for Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> From a security perspective, it implied also that an alliance with the Soviet Union did not necessarily guarantee the security of Vietnam in a confrontational relationship with China. This lesson subsequently became the basis of Vietnam's security policy, especially of its policy toward China. In recent years, it is reflected in the "'Three Nos' Policy" (Ba "Khong") (no alliances, no military bases of other countries on Vietnamese territory, and no requests of third country interventions) discussed later in this paper.

In summary, omnidirectional military diplomacy is essential from both the diplomacy and national defense dimensions in order to maintain and increase Vietnam's security and strategic interests relating to its foreign relations. In the foreign policy domain, in order to build multilayered and stable relationships with all countries, not only the diplomatic institutions but also relevant military organizations participate in broadly-defined diplomatic activities through dialogue and cooperation, thereby playing a part in Vietnam's omnidirectional diplomacy. In the area of national defense policy, Vietnam pursues stability not only of bilateral relations but also of the strategic environment of the region as a whole by engaging in confidence-building among relevant military organizations for the security of Vietnam, a relatively small country. Furthermore, Vietnam's omnidirectional military diplomacy has major significance for addressing the traditional security issue of sovereignty over the South China Sea. In October 2013, the 8th Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party decided on the Strategy of Fatherland Defense in a New Situation. This strategy also reaffirms the importance of omnidirectional (military) diplomacy, and emphasizes that an international environment favorable to the security of Vietnam would be created by forming "balanced comprehensive" relations with other countries.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Dang Cong san Viet Nam, "Bao cao chinh tri cua Ban Chap hanh Trung unog Dang tai Dai hoi dai bieu toan quoc lan thu VII," Bo Ngoai giao Viet Nam, "Chinh sach doi ngoai cua Dang va Nha nuoc Viet Nam," [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/vi/cs\\_doingoai/ns140217213857](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/vi/cs_doingoai/ns140217213857) (accessed on December 8, 2014).

The literal translation of the Vietnamese term for omnidirectional diplomacy is "development of more multifarious and diverse foreign relations" (*da phuong hoa va da dang hoa quan he doi ngoai*). This motto has come into official use since the Eighth Congress of the Communist Party in 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Motoo Furuta, *Betonamu no Sekaishi: Chuka Sekai kara Tonanajia Sekai e* [World History of Vietnam: From a Chinese World to a Southeast Asian World] (Tokyo: The University of Tokyo Press, 1995), p.261.

<sup>7</sup> Phung Quang Thanh, "Toan dan, toan quan quyet tam thuc hien tot chien luoc bao ve To quoc trong tinh hình moi," *Tap chi Cong san*, ngay 11-2-2014.

## 2. Vietnam's Responses to the South China Sea Issue: Enhancement of Maritime Defense Capabilities

This section examines Vietnam's responses to the South China Sea issue and explores the implications of omnidirectional military diplomacy for Vietnam's responses. To do this, it is first useful to compare Vietnam's responses with other responses. In general, one of the responses that a state can take against a rising potential threat is increase its defense capabilities focused on military armament (internal balancing).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in recent years, Vietnam has sought to increase its maritime defense capabilities, especially its naval power, by actively procuring equipment mainly from Russia.

Vietnam procures primarily submarines and frigates from Russia. In December 2009, Vietnam signed an agreement with Russia to purchase six Kilo-class submarines. The first and second submarines which arrived at the Cam Ranh Naval Base in January and March 2014, respectively, were commissioned in April 2014. The third and fourth submarines which arrived in January and June 2015 were commissioned in August 2015. The procurement process is moving ahead steadily, with the fifth submarine delivered in February 2016.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, two Gepard-class frigates were commissioned in 2011, and two frigates whose purchase agreement was signed in late 2011 are scheduled for delivery in 2017.<sup>10</sup> Further, in January 2012, the Hong Ha Shipyard under the Ministry of National Defense of Vietnam delivered the first indigenous patrol vessel to the Navy. This vessel was made with Russian assistance, based on Russia's Svetlyak-class patrol vessel.<sup>11</sup>

Can these procurement and production activities be construed as Vietnam's measures in response to China's advancement into the South China Sea? As a matter of course, the government of Vietnam principally refrains from making comments that draw direct linkages between naval power enhancement and the South China Sea issue, so as not to incite China. However, at a press conference in January 2010, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung stressed that submarines were being purchased for modernizing Vietnam's equipment associated with its economic growth, implying the need to defend Vietnam's vast territorial waters.<sup>12</sup> While Prime Minister Dung's comments do not make direct reference to the South China Sea, they pertain to the South China Sea issue in a broad sense, and at the very least do not deny Vietnam's goal of protecting its territorial rights and interests over the South China Sea. In January 2011, in an interview with Vietnam's leading newspaper *Thanh nien*, Deputy Defense Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh hinted at the linkage between armament and the South China Sea issue, saying, "We do not assert the use of force or intimidation by force to other countries. However, neither can we hold talks empty-handed. We need to affirm that we have the adequate potential and determination to defend our fatherland in the case of an invasion. By doing so we will be able to sit at the negotiation table with confidence on an equal footing for the first time."<sup>13</sup> It can be interpreted from these remarks that while armament cannot

<sup>8</sup> Kuik Cheng-Chwee, "The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol.30, no.2, (August 2008), p.160.

<sup>9</sup> *Thanh nien*, ngày 1-8-2015, *Thanh nien News*, August 1, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> *Jane's Defence Weekly*, April 7, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> *Asian Defence Journal*, January/February 2012, p.50.

<sup>12</sup> *Vietnamnet*, ngày 7-1-2010.

<sup>13</sup> *Thanh nien*, ngày 30-1-2011.

serve as a total deterrent against China, the Vietnamese government and military expect it will have some effect on defending the areas under Vietnam's effective control in the South China Sea, including demonstrating the state's determination to defend the areas.

Along with the enhancement of naval power, Vietnam is hurrying to expand its maritime law enforcement agencies. This is believed to be a strategy in response to China's non-direct use of naval power, as well as consolidation and expansion of influence in the South China Sea in which maritime law enforcement agencies are the main players. In Vietnam's unique context, it is also aimed at permeating its stance of not provoking China via maritime law enforcement agencies, even as it pursues this strategy against the backdrop of its strengthening naval power.

The Vietnam Coast Guard was established as a division of the Navy in 1998.<sup>14</sup> Since then, the agency has undergone a series of structural reforms in a timely manner. Of note are the recent amendments made to the enforcement details of the Vietnam Coast Guard Law in accordance with a government decision of August 2013. According to this decision, the agency with direct control over the Coast Guard changed from the Ministry of National Defense to the Minister of National Defense, while at the same time the Coast Guard is accountable to the government and National Assembly. High-level officers including the supreme commander are appointed by the Prime Minister pursuant to the recommendation of the Minister of National Defense. Furthermore, the Coast Guard, which had the same uniform and rank insignia as the People's Army, acquired its own uniform and rank insignia. The revised enforcement details also retain the strong involvement of the Minister of National Defense. As such, while it cannot be said that the Coast Guard became an organization entirely separate from the military, the Vietnamese government is evidently attempting to establish a structure that makes the Coast Guard a separate organization from the Navy and to further increase its independence.<sup>15</sup>

In January 2013, the Vietnam Fisheries Resources Surveillance was set up under the Directorate of Fisheries of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. Its purpose is to crack down and expose foreign fishing fleets illegally operating in Vietnam's territorial waters, and is tasked with defending Vietnam's sovereignty in the South China Sea.<sup>16</sup> The agency had four surveillance ships at its inception, a number that was far from adequate for dealing with China. However, it has subsequently gradually increased its equipment. For example, state-of-the-art KN-781 surveillance vessel ("KN" is the acronym of the Vietnamese term for Vietnam Fisheries Resources Surveillance "Kiem Ngu" [fisheries surveillance]) made by the Ha Long Shipyard with licensing from Dutch firm Damen was commissioned in July 2014.<sup>17</sup>

Vietnam has made a variety of efforts to enhance its comprehensive maritime defense capacity. However, its capacity enhancement alone will naturally not be adequate for dealing with powerful China. In this regard, omnidirectional military diplomacy becomes important to complement Vietnam's capacity enhancement. Omnidirectional military diplomacy has the goal of

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<sup>14</sup> Canh sat bien Viet Nam, "Cuc Canh sat bien Viet Nam 15 nam xay dung va 'truong thanh,'" <http://canhsatbien.vn/wps/portal> (accessed on February 2, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Canh sat bien Viet Nam, "Ngay 12/10/2013, Nghi Dinh 96/2013/ND-CP chinh thuc co hieu luoc," <http://canhsatbien.vn/wps/portal> (accessed on February 2, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> *Ly tuong Nguoi Viet*, ngay 5-12-2012.

<sup>17</sup> Tong cuc Thuy san, "Ban giao tau kiem ngu KN-781 cho luc luong kiem ngu Viet Nam," ngay 3-7-2014, <http://www.fistenet.gov.vn/d-khai-thac-bao-ve-kiem-ngu/ban-giao-tau-kiem-ngu-kg-781-cho-luc-luong-kiem-ngu-viet-nam/> (accessed on February 2, 2015).

establishing security cooperation relations with various countries in and outside of the region, and thereby, prevent the excessive increase in China's influence on Vietnam.

### **3. The South China Sea Issue and the Nature of Vietnam's Omnidirectional Military Diplomacy**

A characteristic of Vietnam's omnidirectional military diplomacy is that it seeks to address the traditional security issue of sovereignty over the South China Sea by directly applying the general goal of military diplomacy, namely: improving bilateral and multilateral relations as well as the regional strategic environment through cooperative confidence-building efforts, primarily in nontraditional areas. It attempts to keep China's excessive influence from reaching Vietnam by deepening the country's relationships with the United States and other major powers in the region. The purpose is to make it further difficult for China to make strategic decisions that will infringe on the vital interests of Vietnam.<sup>18</sup>

Vietnam establishes classifications for the countries covered by its omnidirectional diplomacy. With the exception of the "special relationship" with Laos and Cambodia, "comprehensive strategic partnership" is Vietnam's most advanced bilateral relationship. The relations with Russia, China, and India fall under this category. The next category down is "strategic partnership," which includes Japan, South Korea, some ASEAN member states, and some EU countries. Vietnam-U.S. relations fall under the even lower category of "comprehensive partnership."<sup>19</sup> Whilst these are the vestiges of the Cold War thinking of distinguishing between socialist "brothers" and others, if we consider the significance of omnidirectional diplomacy, i.e., forging friendly and stable relations with all countries, then the classifications can be construed as Vietnam's diplomatic approach with the ultimate goal of elevating various bilateral relations to the highest level of "comprehensive strategic partnership." However, caution should be exercised, as the bilateral relationships with countries that Vietnam has a "comprehensive strategic partnership" are not necessarily all-around stable, as can be observed from the Vietnam-China relationship. Furthermore, this ranking does not necessarily represent the actual countries with which Vietnam wishes to strengthen relations under omnidirectional military diplomacy. From the perspective of Vietnam's security, the United States is the most important country for deepening cooperation, followed by Russia, India and Japan. Importance is also attached to multilateral military diplomacy within ASEAN. The section below discusses the leading actors for Vietnam's security, in the order of the United States, Russia, India, Japan and ASEAN, and then examines the nature of Vietnam's omnidirectional military diplomacy.

#### *United States*

Vietnam-U.S. military diplomacy marked a turning point in 2010. At the 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the United States declared its engagement in the South China Sea. It is believed that behind this were the active diplomatic efforts of Vietnam, which, as the ASEAN Chair at the

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<sup>18</sup> John Lee, "Reforms will determine degree of Vietnam's dependence on China," *Trends in Southeast Asia*, 2014-#04, ISEAS, p.10.

<sup>19</sup> Thuy Thi Do, "Locating Vietnam-Japan's Strategic Partnership in the Changing East Asian Political Landscape," *JIIA Fellow Report*, 2013, p.8.

time, sought U.S. engagement in this issue.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, 2010 was the year which saw a rapid deepening of their bilateral security cooperation, including the commencement of regular joint exercises. Since then, the two countries have steadily diversified and deepened their cooperation against the backdrop of the changing situation over the South China Sea.

One of the aspects that define Vietnam-U.S. security cooperation is strategic dialogue. The U.S.-Vietnam Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue is a vice minister-level regular meeting held between the U.S. Department of State and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam, and has been convened almost annually since its establishment in 2008. At the seventh dialogue held in Hanoi in January 2015, the two countries discussed cooperation in multiple areas, including maritime security, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction.<sup>21</sup> In addition, the vice minister-level annual U.S.-Vietnam Defense Policy Dialogue was established between their defense ministries in August 2010. At the dialogue held in Hanoi in October 2014, the two countries exchanged views regarding the global and regional situations of mutual interest to them, while simultaneously standardizing their future plans of action based on assessments of their previous cooperation. Also at this dialogue, Vietnam expressed support for the U.S. rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific.<sup>22</sup>

Secondly, the Vietnam-U.S. security cooperation is defined by the holding of regular U.S. Navy port calls in Vietnam as well as joint exercises. In August 2010, the USS George Washington became the first U.S. naval aircraft carrier to visit Vietnam, anchoring off the coast of central Da Nang and inviting Vietnamese military personnel and government officials. Subsequently, the vessel anchored off the coast of southern Vietnam in August 2011 and October 2012, and exchanges were held with Vietnamese government officials and military personnel. In September 2011, the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Advancing Bilateral Defense Cooperation was signed between the two countries. The MOU lists the following five priority areas: high-level exchanges; maritime security; search and rescue; humanitarian assistance and disaster relief; and peacekeeping.<sup>23</sup> As regards joint exercises, the U.S. military presence in Vietnam has been increasing gradually, with the holding of regular bilateral naval exercises in Vietnam since 2010 and the Pacific Partnership humanitarian assistance mission of the U.S. Forces visiting Vietnam as part of its activities biennially in 2010, 2012, and 2014.

Thirdly, U.S. activities in Cam Ranh Bay of strategic importance for Vietnam's maritime defense are also worth highlighting. In October 2010, the United States became the first country to subscribe to the offer after Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung declared that the bay would be open to navies of the world and Vietnam would provide logistics support services for vessels. The U.S. Navy commissioned four vessel maintenance and repairs in Cam Ranh Bay through June 2012, beginning with the transport vessel Richard E. Byrd in August 2011.<sup>24</sup>

In June 2012, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta paid a visit to Cam Ranh Bay, which

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<sup>20</sup> *Reuters*, July 23, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Bo Ngoai giao, "Doi thoai Chinh tri, An ninh, Quoc phong Viet-My lan thu 7," <http://www.mofa.gov.vn/vi/nr040807104143/nr040807105039/ns150123171141> (accessed on February 3, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> *Quan doi Nhan dan*, ngay 21-10-2014.

<sup>23</sup> Carlyle Thayer, "Vietnam Gradually Warms Up to US Military," *The Diplomat*, November 3, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Carlyle Thayer, "Vietnam and the United States: Convergence but Not Congruence of Strategic Interests in the South China Sea," Paper to the 4th Engaging with Vietnam Interdisciplinary Dialogue Conference, Honolulu, November 8-9, 2012.



symbolized the deepening Vietnam-U.S. security cooperation. During his visit to Vietnam, Secretary Panetta held talks with Prime Minister Dung, Minister of Defense Phung Quang Thanh, and other dignitaries. He further visited Cam Ranh Bay and delivered an address aboard the USNS Richard Byrd during its port call for maintenance. In his address, Secretary Panetta stated that he wished to see U.S.-Vietnam cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, peacekeeping operations, and the South China Sea issue. Secretary Panetta declared that the realization of his visit to Cam Ranh Bay, which also has political importance, signifies that the bilateral relationship was entering a “new stage” in the U.S. Asia-Pacific strategy.<sup>25</sup>

By the “new stage,” as Secretary Panetta responded at the joint press conference, the United States was thought have in mind closer security cooperation with Vietnam, more specifically, regular port calls at Cam Ranh Bay by U.S. naval vessels, as part of the U.S. rebalance to the Asia-Pacific. In contrast to the United States’ proactive approach, however, Vietnam at the time was careful not to incite tensions with China. At the joint press conference, Defense Minister Thanh underscored Vietnam’s interest in welcoming logistics support vessels of the U.S. Forces to Vietnam’s “commercial port” for repairs, suggesting that Vietnam did not wish to overly emphasize its cooperation with the United States beyond the country’s intention.<sup>26</sup>

As suggested from the above, the deepening of Vietnam-U.S. security cooperation has been a gradual process and was by no means unilinear. There are two factors that are complicating the situation. The first is Vietnam’s considerations to China. On the subject of expanding cooperation with the United States, Deputy Defense Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh stressed in an interview with the People’s Army newspaper *Quan doi Nhan dan* that the visits by U.S. naval vessels to Vietnam were proposed by the United States and Vietnam no more than accepted this proposal, and therefore, they do not signify Vietnam was approaching the United States. Furthermore, the Deputy Defense Minister emphasized that this exchange program had been planned from before the deterioration of the South China Sea situation and was unrelated to the issue.<sup>27</sup> Deputy Defense Minister Vinh further suggested that Secretary Panetta’s plan to visit Cam Ranh Bay was explained to China in advance to seek its understanding.<sup>28</sup>

The other factor complicating the situation is the disagreements between the two countries over human rights and the political system. Their differences of opinion regarding the human rights issue became exposed when President Truong Tan Sang visited Washington, D.C. in July 2013, becoming the second Vietnamese President to visit the United States since the establishment of their diplomatic relations in 1995. While the two countries agreed to enter into a “comprehensive partnership,” this is one level lower than the “strategic partnership” Vietnam has with China, Russia and Japan as was discussed earlier, indicating that Vietnam continues to face challenges in deepening cooperative relations with the United States. Maintaining the one-party rule of the Communist Party is an absolute imperative for Vietnam, presenting many obstacles to strengthening relations with the United States, a country with a different political system as well as ideology. If anything, Vietnam and China share a strong affinity in this respect. Against the backdrop of

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<sup>25</sup> Jim Garamone, “Panetta’s Cam Ranh Bay Visit Symbolizes Growing U.S.-Vietnam Ties,” American Forces Press Service, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=116597> (accessed on February 4, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> *Thanh nien*, ngày 4-6-2012.

<sup>27</sup> *Quan doi Nhan dan*, ngày 14-8-2010.

<sup>28</sup> *South China Morning Post*, June 3, 2012.

these dissimilarities in the political system and ideology, the visit laid bare the difficulties of the diplomacy with the United States and China toward stabilizing the situation in the South China Sea, namely, of bridging differences of opinion between the two countries over religion and human rights despite Vietnam's wish to gradually deepen its relations with the United States. As China increasingly takes a hardline stance on the South China Sea issue, however, even the most conservative groups of the party have recently begun to seek the improvement of relations with the United States. This trend is seen to have further intensified with the oil-rig incident discussed later.

### *Russia*

Russia has traditionally been a partner of Vietnam. One of the defining aspects of Vietnam-Russia military diplomacy is equipment procurement, as was elaborated earlier. A second aspect, in connection with procurement, is equipment cooperation including human resource development. During his visit to Vietnam in March 2013, Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu visited the Vietnamese naval base in Cam Ranh Bay and held a meeting with Defense Minister Thanh. At the defense ministerial meeting, Vietnam and Russia reached an agreement in principle regarding the establishment of a vice minister-level annual defense dialogue. In addition, they agreed that Russia would support primarily the training of the Vietnamese Navy. Moreover, it has come to light that Russia would be significantly involved in the improvement and development of Cam Ranh Bay, a strategically vital hub for the Vietnamese Navy. Specifically, Russia would be involved in the building of a training facility for submarine crew on the Vietnamese naval base in Cam Ranh Bay, as well as building a facility for a Vietnamese Navy-affiliated company in the logistics area that would conduct vessel repairs, among other activities.<sup>29</sup> A third aspect that defines Vietnam-Russia military diplomacy is the welcoming of Russian vessels at Cam Ranh Bay. When Defense Minister Thanh visited Russia in August 2013, he revealed that Vietnam and Russia are holding talks about welcoming Russian vessels for port calls and maintenance at Cam Ranh Bay, following on the U.S. example. In November 2014, when General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong of the Communist Party visited Russia, the two countries signed an agreement that eases restrictions on Russian vessels' entry into Cam Ranh Bay. This agreement enables Russian vessels to enter Cam Ranh Bay only by notifying port authorities shortly before entering into port.<sup>30</sup>

### *India*

Vietnam has also been developing closer relations with its longstanding partner, India, with mutual visits of dignitaries taking place frequently. In September 2011, Defense Secretary Shashi Kant Sharma of India visited Vietnam. The Sixth Vietnam-India Strategic Defense Dialogue at the vice defense minister-level was held, and the two countries agreed that India would cooperate with the training of Vietnam's submarine crew. Shortly thereafter, Minister of External Affairs S. M. Krishna paid an official visit to Vietnam. External Affairs Minister Krishna held a bilateral meeting with Minister of Foreign Affairs Pham Binh Minh of Vietnam. With regard to the South China Sea issue, the two countries agreed on peacefully resolving the dispute in accordance freedom of navigation in the sea, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and the

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<sup>29</sup> *ITAR-TASS*, March 4, 2013; *Quan doi Nhan dan*, ngày 5-3-2013; *Tuoi tre*, ngày 3-6-2013.

<sup>30</sup> *ITAR-TASS*, November 27, 2014.

Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). At the meeting, External Affairs Minister Krishna reportedly communicated to Foreign Minister Minh that India intended to implement the joint development project in the South China Sea between Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited and PetroVietnam, despite China's strong protests. Additionally, President Sang visited India in October 2011, at a timing almost coinciding with the visit to China by General Secretary Trong of the Communist Party of Vietnam. In the joint declaration released on the occasion of the President's visit to India, the two countries referred to the peaceful resolution of the South China Sea issue and confirmed the signing of a memorandum of understanding regarding joint development in these waters. Deputy Defense Minister Vinh accompanied President Sang on his visit to India, and held a meeting with Defense Secretary Sharma of India. At the meeting, the two countries agreed to promote cooperation between their defense authorities.

Nevertheless, India has traditionally exercised caution toward full-fledged involvement in the South China Sea issue. At the ASEAN-India Summit held in December 2012, Prime Minister Dung wished for India to support ASEAN and China in implementing the DOC and ASEAN's Six-Point Principles on the South China Sea and expressed expectations toward India's engagement. In response, External Affairs Minister Salman Khrushid of India demonstrated a cautious stance, saying India wishes the dispute to be resolved among the relevant countries. In this regard, the new Indian administration's proactive supports for Vietnam are noteworthy. When Prime Minister Dung visited India in October 2014, a military agreement was signed stipulating that India would loan US\$1 million to Vietnam to purchase patrol boats from India.<sup>31</sup> Attention will be paid to whether the new Modi administration changes India's traditionally cautious stance toward the South China Sea and increase engagement with Vietnam.

### *Japan*

Vietnam and Japan have steadily deepened their defense cooperation in recent years, and have also shown enthusiasm for maritime security cooperation. In January 2013, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Vietnam for his first overseas visit since taking office in December 2012. With respect to the situation in the South China Sea, the Prime Minister made his opinion known about the importance of the rule of law, including international law, and expressed agreement with the view of Vietnam. Furthermore, as part of the capacity-building assistance programs of the Ministry of Defense, Japan held a seminar on underwater medicine in Vietnam in May 2013 as well as training on underwater medicine for Vietnamese Navy personnel at a Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force facility in late September 2013. In mid-September, Minister of Defense Itsunori Onodera visited Vietnam. The Minister visited the Vietnamese Navy's Fourth Fleet headquarters in Cam Ranh Bay and observed the Navy's defense setup for the Spratly Islands. Vietnam's welcoming of the Japanese Defense Minister to Cam Ranh Bay signifies the importance Vietnam attaches to Japan's engagement in Vietnam's security. On the margins of the ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit in December 2013, Prime Minister Abe announced that Japan would provide patrol boats to Vietnam. In this manner, Japan supports the capacity enhancement of Vietnam's maritime defense.

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<sup>31</sup> *Straits Times*, October 29, 2014.

## ASEAN

Vietnam, which assumed the ASEAN chairmanship in 2010, attempted to fend off pressure from China by internationalizing the South China Sea issue, i.e., placing it on the agenda of multilateral dialogues. Therefore, Vietnam undertook proactive diplomatic efforts to ensure that the South China Sea issue was actively taken up at ASEAN-related meetings and included in the declaration. By doing so, Vietnam succeeded in eliciting the U.S. position to engage proactively in the South China Sea issue. At a press conference held on the sidelines of the ARF following the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton vowed, "The United States, like every nation, has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea." The Secretary of State stated that the United States supports a collaborative diplomatic process by all claimants for resolving territorial disputes without the use of force, supports the DOC, and encourages the parties to reach agreement on a full code of conduct.<sup>32</sup> Deputy Defense Minister Vinh praised the achievements made by Vietnam as ASEAN Chair, saying, "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."<sup>33</sup> In this respect, the establishment of the expanded ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM-Plus) during Vietnam's chairmanship was, for Vietnam, a major achievement of military diplomacy that drew upon the ASEAN framework. Subsequently, Vietnam carries out active diplomatic activities in collaboration with the Philippines and other countries for holding effective discussions on the South China Sea at ASEAN-related meetings.

## **4. China vis-à-vis Vietnam's Omnidirectional Military Diplomacy, and the Impact of the Oil-rig Incident**

As described above, Vietnam has deepened relations with the United States, Russia, India and Japan, and proactively utilizes the multilateral frameworks of ASEAN. Not mentioned above but also included in Vietnam's omnidirectional military diplomacy is China. Vietnam and China had a conflicting relationship in the last years of the Cold War. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European socialist bloc, the end of the Cold War, and the resolution of the Cambodia issue provided an impetus to normalizing Vietnam-China relations in 1991. The transition process from deterioration to normalization of bilateral relations—especially the holding of normalization negotiations in which China conditionally accepted Vietnam's requests—provided Vietnam with a lesson of history. The lesson for Vietnam was to avoid having an all-out confrontational relationship with China, given their absolutely asymmetric relationship as was noted earlier. Since then, Vietnam has taken pains to maintain a "friendly neighbor relationship" with China. In 2000, the two countries fundamentally resolved the issue of the land border and the maritime border of the Gulf of Tonkin, an outstanding issue between the countries, and this was expected to further stabilize Vietnam-China relations. However, the recent resurfacing of the South China Sea issue is beginning to alter the relationship between Vietnam and China, which had remained relatively friendly since its normalization.

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<sup>32</sup> *Straits Times*, July 24, 2010.

<sup>33</sup> *Thanh nien*, ngày 2-10-2011.

Vietnam in principle wishes to discuss the South China Sea issue within the framework of “ASEAN and China,” while at the same time, maintaining bilateral channels of the party, government and military with China. Using these channels, especially the diplomatic channel, Vietnam frequently conducts bilateral dialogues regarding maritime issues, including the South China Sea issue. In October 2011, General Secretary Trong visited China, which led to Vietnam and China’s signing of the Agreement on Basic Principles Guiding the Settlement of Maritime Issues (*Thoa thuan ve nhung nguyen tac co ban chi dao giai quyet van de tren bien*). According to this agreement, the two countries shall deal with and solve maritime issues pursuant to the following principles:

- The two countries will attach importance to the general situation of the bilateral relationship, settle maritime issues according to the “16-letter motto,”<sup>34</sup> turn the South China Sea into a sea area of peace, friendship, cooperation and development, and contribute to regional peace and stability.
- The two countries will expand their common understanding in accordance with legal principles, including UNCLOS, and history.
- The two countries will settle their maritime disputes through consultations and friendly means, in compliance with the principles and spirit of the DOC; disputes relating to third parties will be settled by holding consultations also with these parties.
- Maritime issues will be settled in the spirit of mutual respect, equality and mutual benefit.
- In parallel with the consultations on the delimitation of territorial waters outside of the Gulf of Tonkin, the two countries will deepen cooperation on environmental conservation, ocean scientific surveys, rescue at sea, and disaster risk reduction, and will contribute to settling more difficult issues.
- The two countries agree to hold regular border consultations twice a year and extraordinary consultations if necessary, and establish a hotline to swiftly deal with maritime issues.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, at the foreign ministers’ meeting held in Beijing in February 2012, the two countries reaffirmed their commitment to peacefully settling their differences over maritime issues through consultations. Based on this agreement at the foreign minister-level, Deputy Foreign Minister Ho Xuan Son visited China in late February, and the two countries agreed to hold working-level meetings at the director general-level regarding the delimitation of territorial waters outside of the Gulf of Tonkin and joint development, as well as to set up a hotline for maritime issues between their authorities.

The channel between the military forces of Vietnam and China has been maintained even as tensions rise over the South China Sea. Its functions include providing explanations to China regarding the activities of the Vietnam People’s Army, especially its security cooperation with the United States. Deputy Defense Minister Vinh visited China immediately after the first Vietnam-

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<sup>34</sup> “Friendly neighbourliness, comprehensive cooperation, long-term stability, and future orientation” (*“lang gieng huu nghi, hop tac toan dien, on dinh lau dai, huong toi tuong lai”*). This “16-letter motto” has been frequently mentioned as a basic policy of the bilateral relationship ever since it was enshrined in the joint declaration of the Vietnam-China summit meeting in February 1999.

<sup>35</sup> *Nhan dan*, ngày 12-10-2011.

U.S. joint military exercise conducted in August 2010. Deputy Defense Minister Vinh held a meeting with Ma Xiaotian, Deputy Chief of the Joint Staff of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and paid a courtesy call on Liang Guanglie, Minister of National Defense. At the press conference following the meeting, Deputy Defense Minister Vinh stressed that Vietnam would not become a U.S. ally, that Vietnam's military exchanges with the United States are nothing special and are no more than one of Vietnam's military exchanges with other countries including China, and that Vietnam-U.S. relations and Vietnam-China relations should be distinguished. As can be inferred from his comments at the press conference, Deputy Defense Minister Vinh is considered to have explained to China during his meetings with the PLA leadership that Vietnam's military exchanges with the United States were unrelated to the South China Sea issue and Vietnam-China relations. In addition, Vietnam put forward the "'Three Nos' Policy" (Ba "Khong"): no alliances with any country; no military bases of any country on Vietnamese territory; and no requests to third countries to intervene in Vietnam's confrontations with other countries.<sup>36</sup> In August 2011, Deputy Defense Minister Vinh visited China once again, and the two countries agreed to establish a hotline between their defense ministries.

Additionally, the two countries regularly conduct security cooperation. In June 2011, two patrol boats of the Vietnam People's Navy visited Zhanjiang, Guangdong Province, and carried out a joint inspection of the Gulf of Tonkin with the PLA Navy. In reporting this, *Quan doi Nhan dan* published China's comment that the activity "should contribute to maintaining calm and to stabilizing the region" in connection with the South China Sea issue.<sup>37</sup> In the following year, June 2012, the two navies conducted their 13th joint inspection in the Gulf of Tonkin. In September 2012, the third Strategic Defense Dialogue was held in Hanoi.

Vietnam deemed that the South China Sea issue as it relates to the Vietnam-China relationship would be properly manageable if the two countries continue to hold dialogues and reach a consensus. However, this belief was overturned by the oil-rig incident in the Paracel Islands. Its beginning dates back to early May 2014, when China, in de facto control over the Paracel Islands claimed by both countries, set up an oil rig and started drilling in the vicinity of the islands. Vietnam lodged strong protests and resistance, perceiving this as China's strengthened efforts to make its control a *fait accompli*.

On May 3, 2014, China's Maritime Safety Administration announced that the Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil rig (as known as "HD-981" in Vietnamese after "Hai Duong" meaning "maritime") would conduct drilling in a location 17 nautical miles south of Triton Island (Vietnamese name: Dao Tri Ton; Chinese name: Zhongjian Dao) of the Paracel Islands from May 2 to August 15. On May 4, Spokesperson Le Hai Binh of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam expressed strong objections, stating that the drilling location is 130 nautical miles from the coastline of Vietnam's mainland, that the entire area of the activity falls within the exclusive economic zone and continental shelf of Vietnam, and that Vietnam has sovereignty over the Paracel Islands, and therefore, China's act which has not obtained Vietnam's permission is illegal.<sup>38</sup>

Following the remarks by the Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Vietnam promptly took

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<sup>36</sup> *Viet Bao*, ngày 26-8-2010.

<sup>37</sup> *Quan doi Nhan dan*, ngày 26/6/2011.

<sup>38</sup> Bộ Ngoại giao, "Tra loi cua Nguoi Phat ngon Bo Ngoai giao Le Hai Binh ngay 4/5/2014," [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/vi/tt\\_baochi/pbnfn/ns140505144032](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/vi/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns140505144032) (accessed on June 12, 2014).

several responses. First, it demanded China's suspension of the drilling and bilateral consultations. On May 4, state-owned oil company PetroVietnam sent a letter to China National Offshore Oil Corporation requesting the immediate suspension of operations. On the same day, a delegate of the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry met with and handed a similar letter to a delegate of the Chinese Embassy in Vietnam.<sup>39</sup> Also on the same day, Ho Xuan Son, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs and head of the National Border Committee of Vietnam, held a teleconference with Liu Zhenmin, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs and head of the national border committee of the Chinese government. On May 6, Minister of Foreign Affairs Pham Binh Minh held talks over the telephone with State Councilor Yang Jiechi. Vietnam requested China to remove the oil rig and withdraw its vessels, stating that China's bringing of the oil rig and deployment of many vessels including naval vessels since May 1 are a violation of international law and infringe upon the sovereignty of Vietnam.<sup>40</sup> In addition, talks were held between a delegate of the Ministry of National Defense of Vietnam and a Chinese military attaché in Vietnam. According to the information released by Vietnam, a total of eight rounds of talks were held with China through May 7 among foreign ministry officials alone, and more than 30 rounds through June 5.<sup>41</sup> In an interview conducted on the margins of the Shangri-La Dialogue, Defense Minister Thanh indicated that Vietnam proposed to China a summit meeting to achieve a breakthrough in the situation.<sup>42</sup>

Secondly, Vietnam deployed patrol ships of the Vietnam Coast Guard and surveillance ships of the Directorate of Fisheries of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development to the drilling location, confronted Chinese vessels and attempted to monitor and block the drilling, including demanding China to remove the oil rig. According to a press conference held by the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry on May 7, the country's fisheries surveillance ships discovered during monitoring operations on May 1 that an oil rig was moving southward near Triton Island of the Paracel Islands. On the next day, May 2, the oil rig was installed. The number of Chinese vessels guarding the oil rig, including naval vessels, had increased to 60. On May 3 to 4, China Coast Guard vessels intentionally collided with Vietnam Coast Guard ships, and not only destroyed them but also sprayed water canons at Vietnam's fisheries surveillance ships, injuring six Vietnamese fisheries surveillance personnel. Chinese patrol vessels were armed, with weapon covers off and weapons at-the-ready. In addition, China used aircraft to threaten Vietnamese patrol ships. In contrast, Vietnam emphasized that it was refraining from dispatching the Navy and acted with restraint in their resistance.<sup>43</sup> Vietnam signaled to China and to the international community that it wished to

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<sup>39</sup> *Thanh nien*, ngày 4 và 7-5-2014. A letter was handed over for the second time on June 1 and for the third time on June 4.

<sup>40</sup> *Thanh nien*, ngày 7-5-2014.

<sup>41</sup> Bộ Ngoại giao, "Nội dung thông báo tại cuộc họp báo quốc tế về việc Trung Quốc hạ đặt giàn khoan trái phép trong vùng biển Việt Nam," Hà Nội, ngày 7-5-2014, [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/vi/tt\\_baochi/pbnfn/ns140509011156](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/vi/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns140509011156) "Nội dung Họp báo quốc tế về tình hình Biển Đông ngày 5/6/2014," [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/vi/tt\\_baochi/pbnfn/ns140605124230](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/vi/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns140605124230) (accessed on June 12, 2014).

<sup>42</sup> *Quan doi Nhan dan*, ngày 1-6-2014. According to a source of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Vietnam informally requested a teleconference between General Secretary Trong or President Sang and President Xi Jinping as well as the dispatch of a special envoy to Beijing, but these were rejected by China. (*Kyodo News*, June 11, 2014).

<sup>43</sup> Bộ Ngoại giao, "Nội dung thông báo tại cuộc họp báo quốc tế về việc Trung Quốc hạ đặt giàn khoan trái phép trong vùng biển Việt Nam," Hà Nội, ngày 7-5-2014, [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/vi/tt\\_baochi/pbnfn/ns140509011156](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/vi/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns140509011156) (accessed on June 17, 2014); Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, "Việt Nam đã kiềm chế trước những hành động hung hăng, ngang ngược của Trung Quốc," ngày 8-5-2014, *Thanh nien*, ngày 7-5-2014.

refrain from dispatching naval vessels and not initiate provocations.

Faced with Vietnamese resistance, China repeatedly collided with and fired water cannons at the Vietnamese patrol ships in order to block and interfere with their activities. Collision incidents hereafter intermittently continued, such that a Vietnamese fishing boat was rammed by a Chinese fishing boat and sunk on May 26, while Vietnamese patrol and surveillance ships were damaged and fisheries surveillance personnel were injured.<sup>44</sup> On June 5, the Vietnam Foreign Ministry held the second press conference, announcing that the total number of Chinese vessels had reached 140 by then, that 19 fisheries surveillance ships and 12 fishing boats were damaged, and that 12 fisheries surveillance personnel had been injured.<sup>45</sup>

Thirdly, Vietnam mobilized international public opinion. The Vietnam Foreign Ministry held three large press conferences (May 7, June 5 and 16) for domestic and international media. Tran Duy Hai, Deputy Head of the National Border Committee; Ngo Ngoc Thu, Deputy Commander of the Coast Guard; and Ha Le, Deputy Head of the Vietnam Fisheries Resources Surveillance Department, attended the three press conferences to clarify the details of the situation. At these press conferences, Vietnam authorities sought to keep China in check by disclosing the details of the equipment of the deployed Chinese Navy, while emphasizing that Vietnam still maintained its position of self-restraint. Additionally, the authorities allowed domestic and international media to board a patrol ship of the Vietnam Coast Guard and report on the scene. At the same time, Vietnam released a video taken of a sinking Vietnamese fishing boat rammed by a Chinese fishing boat. Further, the Vietnamese government sent a letter to the United Nations in an attempt to internationalize the issue and to appeal its legitimacy.<sup>46</sup>

Fourthly, Vietnam authorities permitted demonstrations though they had been strictly controlled in the past. Anti-China demonstrations were staged in the four major cities of Vietnam, i.e., the capital city Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang and Hue, on May 11. It was an unprecedented phenomenon that demonstrations were conducted in succession in major cities in Vietnam. Moreover, anti-China demonstrations took place not only in Vietnam but also in major cities in the world, including Tokyo, Paris, Hong Kong and San Francisco in mid and late May.<sup>47</sup> However, a peaceful demonstration in the Binh Duong Industrial Park in the suburbs of Ho Chi Minh City developed into a riot, damaging foreign company plants and killing several people including Chinese personnel. In response, the authorities made a sudden reversal to controlling demonstrations.

Fifthly, at the ASEAN meetings held in Naypyidaw, the capital city of Myanmar, shortly after the affairs occurred, Vietnam engaged in active diplomatic actions calling for an ASEAN statement expressing unified and strong concerns over the tensions in the South China Sea. As a result, an emergency meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers was held on May 10, and the statement

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<sup>44</sup> *Thanh nien*, ngày 26-5-2014.

<sup>45</sup> Bo Ngoai giao, “Noi dung Hop bao quoc te ve tinh hình Bien Dong ngày 5 tháng 6 năm 2014,” [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/vi/tt\\_baochi/pbnfn/ns140605124230](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/vi/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns140605124230) (accessed on June 17, 2014).

<sup>46</sup> *Thanh nien*, ngày 16-5-2014.

<sup>47</sup> To the extent of the author’s knowledge, the cities where anti-China demonstrations took place outside of Vietnam as of July 2014 were Tokyo, Taipei, Paris, Melbourne, The Hague, Brussels, San Francisco, Osaka, Hong Kong, Sydney, Montreal, Bordeaux, Stockholm, Ottawa, Moscow, Taichung, Tainan and Hiroshima.



released after the meeting expressed “serious concerns” over the South China Sea situation.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, on May 13, the Chairman’s Statement of the ASEAN Summit held on May 11 was released, expressing the “serious concerns” of the ASEAN leaders.<sup>49</sup> Subsequently, the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) was held on May 20, whose joint declaration calls for self-restraint by relevant nations and enshrines the strengthening of confidence-building measures using hotlines.<sup>50</sup> It can be inferred that ASEAN was able to agree on expressing strong concerns over the South China Sea issue in a series of meetings, not only because of the efforts of the claimants such as Vietnam and the Philippines, but also because of the steady chairmanship of Myanmar, the chair country.

Vietnam demonstrated particularly strong opposition to the confrontation over the oil rig, distinctly different from its responses to the series of troubles occurring at sea or diplomatic exchanges of criticisms in the wake of the recently reignited South China Sea issue. Vietnam’s strong resistance was manifested in its dispatch of many patrol ships, surveillance ships and fishing boats to the scene as a show of strong resistance to China’s drilling, and extensive advocacy through the release of photographs and video clips showing the situation of the collisions with China’s vessels. Moreover, the country permitted anti-China demonstrations inside and outside the country, and seemingly encouraged demonstrations outside the country. Also notable is the unusually severe tone of the remarks by the Communist Party of Vietnam, which has its own connections with the Communist Party of China and has functioned as a stabilizing mechanism between the two countries. The report of the 9th Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam issued on May 14 declared that the country opposed China’s drilling, that it would work toward the suspension of the drilling and that the whole party, all people and the whole Vietnam People’s Army would make collective efforts in order to defend the country’s independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity while relying on peaceful means.<sup>51</sup>

The following three factors underlie Vietnam’s strong resistance. First, Vietnamese authorities’ resistance to China and the people’s anti-China sentiment heightened because, in the vicinity of the Paracel Islands, more than ever Vietnamese fishermen were repeatedly harassed by Chinese authorities who attached great importance to securing China’s maritime rights and interests. The China Coast Guard seized Vietnamese fishermen operating in the sea area, confiscated their

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<sup>48</sup> ASEAN, “ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Statement on the Current Developments in the South China Sea,” Nay Pyi Taw, May 10, 2014, [http://www.asean.org/news/asean-statement-communicues/item/asean-foreign-ministers-statement-on-the-current-developments-in-the-south-china-sea?category\\_id=26](http://www.asean.org/news/asean-statement-communicues/item/asean-foreign-ministers-statement-on-the-current-developments-in-the-south-china-sea?category_id=26) (accessed on June 20, 2014).

<sup>49</sup> ASEAN, “Chairman’s Statement of the 24th ASEAN Summit: ‘Moving forward in Unity to a Peaceful and Prosperous Community,’” Nay Pyi Taw, May 11, 2014, <http://www.asean.org/images/documents/24thASEANSummit/24th%20ASEAN%20Summit%20Chairman’s%20Statement.pdf> (accessed on June 20, 2014).

<sup>50</sup> ADMM, “Joint Declaration on the ASEAN Defence Ministers on Defence Cooperation towards Peaceful and Prosperous ASEAN Community,” Nay Pyi Taw, May 20, 2014, [https://admm.asean.org/dmdocuments/2014\\_Joint%20Declaration\\_%208th%20ADMM%20Joint%20Declaration\\_NPT\\_20%20May%202014.pdf](https://admm.asean.org/dmdocuments/2014_Joint%20Declaration_%208th%20ADMM%20Joint%20Declaration_NPT_20%20May%202014.pdf) (accessed on June 20, 2014).

<sup>51</sup> “Trung Quoc chua the la mot ‘nuoc lon’ kho con loi hanh xu tuy tien,” *Bao Dien tu Dang Cong san Viet Nam*, ngay 24-5-2014, <http://baodientu.chinhphu.vn/Tin-noi-bat/Hoi-nghi-Trung-uong-9-be-mac/199202.vgp>; “Hoi nghi Trung uong 8 be mac,” *Bao Dien tu Chinh phu NCXHCN VN*, ngay 14-5-2014; *Thanh nien*, ngay 17-5-2014; “Thong bao Hoi nghi Trung uong 9 khoa XI,” *Bao Dien tu Chinh phu*, ngay 14-5-2014, <http://baodientu.chinhphu.vn/Tin-noi-bat/Thong-bao-Hoi-nghi-Trung-uong-9-khoa-XI/199228.vgp> (accessed on June 20, 2014).

equipment including fishing boats, detained them for long periods and subjected them to physical abuse. These affairs continued up to the incident. Secondly, China's start of drilling in the Paracel Islands was China's attempt to solidify its effective control over the islands and their vicinity—an unacceptable new development for Vietnam that claimed sovereignty over the Paracel Islands. Thirdly, as both countries had agreed to the basic principles for the settlement of maritime issues when General Secretary Trong visited China in October 2011, Vietnam was under the impression that an atmosphere was being created to resolve maritime issues between Vietnam and China including the South China Sea by negotiation. Therefore, for Vietnam, the start of the drilling represented a unilateral and sudden policy change by China. For this reason, it can be surmised that Vietnam's strong and unprecedented response was a counteraction to its hitherto refrained posture. This is a typical example of what Brantly Womack describes as an understanding gap in asymmetric relationships. In the case at hand, Vietnam reacted strongly to China's action that did not take its impact very seriously.<sup>52</sup>

When General Secretary Trong attended a briefing session of the outcomes of the 7th session of the 13th National Assembly held in Hanoi on July 1, he explained the South China Sea situation in detail, mentioning even the possibility of a military confrontation, stating, "We should not start a confrontation or war. At the same time, however, we should independently prepare for every possibility."<sup>53</sup> In the past, it was primarily Prime Minister Dung's role to make concrete comments on the South China Sea issue, out of strong considerations for China and for maintaining power balance within Vietnam's political leadership. This time, however, General Secretary Trong, who is in the highest position of not only the Communist Party but also the Vietnamese political leadership, provided detailed remarks regarding the South China Sea and China in an unprecedented move, and furthermore, this was reported by various kinds of media, indicating that the Vietnamese people and the political leadership harbored a strong sense of crisis toward this affair. The unprecedented remarks made by the General Secretary signify that the tension with China over the South China Sea has entered a new phase from Vietnam's standpoint.

Presumably, Vietnam's authorities fully understood that they themselves did not have decisive and effective measures to suspend China's operations. Accordingly, Vietnam's tactic was to make China's hardline policy as costly as possible in order to make it difficult for China to take similar actions in the future.

As a concrete countermeasure, first the Vietnamese government declared that it would consider instituting proceedings with an international tribunal, similar to the Philippines, in response to China's commencement of drilling.<sup>54</sup> This should be seen as Vietnam's third approach, complementing maritime defense capacity enhancement and omnidirectional military diplomacy. The confrontation in May 2014 made Vietnam realize the limits of its existing two approaches for addressing the South China Sea issue, and provided an impetus for embarking on a third approach. By instituting legal proceedings and hearings, China's territorial claims in the South China Sea would become an issue of international law and may become more known among the international community. It appears that the Chinese government is strongly discouraging

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<sup>52</sup> Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2006), pp.82-83.

<sup>53</sup> *Nhan dan*, ngày 2-7-2014.

<sup>54</sup> *Thanh nien*, ngày 25-5-2014.

Vietnam from instituting legal proceedings. If Vietnam decides to institute proceedings, it may cause a serious blow to China, and at the same time, the relationship between Vietnam and China is expected to further worsen. On June 23, the Vietnamese government signed the Host Country Agreement with the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), and thereby, took the first concrete step toward instituting legal proceedings.<sup>55</sup>

China's reaction has focused on dispelling any suspicions about its illegitimacy, denying that it deployed naval vessels, and claiming that the collisions were initiated by the Vietnamese which rammed into China's vessels first. Initially, China had called for talks with Vietnam. Indeed, on June 18, State Councilor Yang Jiechi visited Vietnam and held a meeting with General Secretary Trong, Prime Minister Dung and Minister of Foreign Affairs Minh. However, no notable progress was achieved by the meeting.

Subsequently, in mid-July, China withdrew the oil rig stating that it completed its operations, temporarily bringing closure to the situation. To restore their relations, the two countries restarted frequent mutual visits by their dignitaries. Le Hong Anh, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee of the Communist Party, and Defense Minister Thanh visited China in August and October, respectively, and the two countries agreed not to escalate the situation. In late December 2014, Yu Zhengsheng, a Politburo member, visited Vietnam and held a meeting with Vietnam's political leadership. However, China reportedly told Vietnam to halt anti-China propaganda, to stop internationalizing the issue and to settle the dispute on a strictly bilateral basis.<sup>56</sup> It is believed that China was keeping a check on Vietnam in light of the request it made in mid-December to the PCA to pay due attention to the legal rights of Vietnam in the South China Sea.<sup>57</sup>

In regard to Vietnam's response, a challenge will be to free itself from its economic dependence on China. However, though China is the largest trading partner for Vietnam, the amount of ODA and investment from China is not significant compared to that of other countries. Moreover, it is not clear whether China has the means to deliver a crucial blow to Vietnam's economy. In this sense, Vietnam is expected to reform its domestic economic system and diversify its trading partners as it seeks to reduce its dependence on China economically.<sup>58</sup> For Vietnam, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) has critical significance for both economics and security.

History suggests that a decisive confrontation with Vietnam would also present challenges for China. During the Cold War, China feared the nightmare of a U.S. attack on China from the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan or Indochina. Though, off course, today's various conditions are different from those of the Cold War, excessively driving Vietnam to the side of the United States while the U.S.-Vietnam relationship is moving forward could have negative effects for China's security. In this respect, it is anticipated that Vietnam would develop closer relations with the United States while keeping an eye on China's reaction. In the aftermath of the oil drilling incident, Foreign Minister Minh held a teleconference with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, and requested U.S. support and assistance for Vietnam. In October 2014, the United States decided to lift a part of its arms embargo against Vietnam which Vietnam had requested from before, allowing maritime security-

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<sup>55</sup> *Tien Phong*, ngày 23-6-2014.

<sup>56</sup> Carlyle Thayer, "China and Vietnam Eschew Megaphone Diplomacy," *The Diplomat*, January 2, 2015.

<sup>57</sup> Bộ Ngoại giao, "Phát biểu của Ngoại trưởng Nguyễn Xuân Phúc tại Hội nghị Bộ Ngoại giao Lào-Việt tại Hà Nội," [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/vi/tt\\_baochi/pbnfn/ns141211170842](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/vi/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns141211170842) (accessed on February 16, 2015).

<sup>58</sup> Lee, "Reforms will determine degree of Vietnam's dependence on China."

related equipment to be supplied to Vietnam.<sup>59</sup> In July 2015, General Secretary Trong visited the United States. By first visiting China in April 2015, Vietnam maintained its policy of balanced relations with the United States and China. However, the first ever visit to the United States by the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam was not only a landmark event for Vietnam-U.S. relations; it signifies Vietnam's more vivid intent to develop closer relations with the United States against the backdrop of the tensions with China.

## **Conclusion**

Vietnam has responded to the rise of China in the South China Sea through the pursuit of omnidirectional military diplomacy that complements its asymmetric maritime defense capacity. It has steadily deepened security cooperation with major countries outside of the region including the United States. With China, Vietnam has sought to stabilize the bilateral relationship through confidence building via a series of exchanges, such as exchanges between senior officials and joint naval patrols. Vietnam deemed that the South China Sea issue as it relates to the Vietnam-China relationship would be properly manageable if the exchange channels at the party, government and military levels were maintained and enhanced.

Vietnam's presumption and expectations were overturned by the oil-rig incident in May 2014. China began oil drilling by way of neglecting Vietnam's wishes, resulting in a fierce standoff between the patrol ships of the maritime law enforcement agencies of the two countries. For Vietnam, this incident was a wake-up call about the limits of omnidirectional military diplomacy, while at the same time, forcing the country to review its foreign and national defense strategies. Vietnam has shown eagerness to develop even closer relations with the United States as well as deepen relations with Japan and India. On the economic front, Vietnam is anticipated to explore measures to reduce its dependence on China.

Whether these changes in Vietnam's policy should be construed as a shift in its basic policy of omnidirectional military diplomacy, however, will depend on a careful analysis of how the situation unfolds. An all-out confrontation with China is still ruled out as an option for Vietnam. In fact, the changes in the circumstances following the oil drilling incident should be understood as Vietnam upholding its omnidirectional military diplomacy covering China, while making subtle changes to the weight given to the countries it includes. It is expected that Vietnam will need to steer an even more cautious policy as the situation over the South China Sea becomes a complex issue involving not only Vietnam and China, but also other ASEAN member states and major countries outside of the region including Japan and the United States, and increases in uncertainty.

In 2016, Vietnam underwent important developments in the South China Sea: first, the country further reinforced security ties with the United States. During his first (and probably last) visit to Vietnam, President Obama declared that the United States would completely lift its embargo of military equipment to Vietnam. Second, after the 12th National Congress of the Communist Party, a new political leadership was launched in Vietnam. Conservative Nguyen Phu Trong stayed in the position of General Secretary, whereas Nguyen Tan Dung, often described as a vocal claimer against China, retired from Prime Minister and the Politburo of the party. The

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<sup>59</sup> U.S. Department of State, Jen Psaki, Spokesperson, Daily Press Briefing, October 2, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/10/232495.htm> (accessed on February 16, 2015).

new political leadership might take a new approach toward stabilizing relations with China. Third, the award of the case between the Philippines and China in the PCA was delivered in July, which completely rejected China's claims regarding the South China Sea. Seeing the Philippines' legal victory, Vietnam is likely to begin to consider a new legal approach toward addressing the South China Sea disputes.

Vietnam is consistently active in strengthening security cooperation with Japan, which was exemplified by its acceptance of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force vessels to Cam Ranh in 2016. As Vietnam gains further importance as a partner for defense cooperation, Japan, for its part, should also commit to deepening cooperation with Vietnam, premised on the complexity of its omnidirectional military diplomacy policy.

