

Vietnam's "Bamboo Diplomacy": A Survival Strategy amid Great Power Competition*

SHOJI Tomotaka**

Abstract

This paper examines the characteristics of Vietnam's "bamboo diplomacy," a survival strategy amid great power competition, and its development. Bamboo diplomacy refers to a balanced foreign policy that maintains strategic autonomy and promotes national interests without taking sides with any particular country by adopting flexible engagements according to the external environment and domestic situation. In implementing its bamboo diplomacy, Vietnam maintains relations with the United States and Russia while making it clear that it prioritizes China over any other country at important junctures in its foreign relations. Due to the transitional political situation in Vietnam, the current political leadership cannot afford to effectively deal with any instability in its foreign relations, especially with China. Therefore, Vietnam has shown deference to China. The new General Secretary To Lam has also inherited the bamboo diplomacy of the late General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong.

Introduction: What Is Vietnam's "Bamboo Diplomacy"?

In recent years, international political trends have been shaped by great power competition, with strategic rivalry between the United States and China intensifying in particular. With Russia joining the U.S.-China confrontation, the structure of the rivalry has grown more complex, and the international situation has deepened into confusion. Caught between the great powers, other nations find themselves tossed about, struggling to strike an appropriate balance with the United States and China and grappling with how to manage the influence wielded by these powers.

Vietnam is one such nation. The country belongs to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which has become a principal arena for the U.S.-China rivalry. Vietnam harbors historical grievances against China and fought a brutal war against the United States during the Cold War, yet is now striving to build stable cooperative relationships with both countries. It has also maintained a distinctive friendly and cooperative relationship with Russia over many years.

From the post-Cold War period to the present, Vietnam has pursued omnidirectional diplomacy, but recently has come to characterize its diplomatic style as "Vietnamese bamboo." This "bamboo diplomacy" signifies flexibility in foreign policy that enables omnidirectional diplomacy and is fundamentally grounded in balancing various bilateral relationships while relying on the

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** Director, Regional Studies Department, NIDS

multilateral cooperative framework of ASEAN, particularly against the backdrop of great power competition. This paper examines the characteristics of Vietnam's bamboo diplomacy, which can be understood as a survival strategy amid great power competition, and its concrete development.

Existing scholarship on Vietnamese diplomacy is somewhat established regarding omnidirectional diplomacy since the post-Cold War period, particularly focusing on relations with China.¹ Many brief commentaries have also been published on bamboo diplomacy.² However, no research has treated bamboo diplomacy as continuous with omnidirectional diplomacy while following the latest developments and academically discussing its implications.³ Therefore, this paper aims to add a new perspective to this existing scholarship through the lens of bamboo diplomacy. In doing so, it draws appropriately on the author's own analyses published intermittently thus far regarding key issues.⁴ Moreover, this research not only provides academic insights for studies on Vietnam as a member state of ASEAN, but also offers an analytical perspective for understanding the foreign strategies of countries inevitably drawn into great power competition centered on the United States and China.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 1 clarifies the process by which Vietnam's political leadership came to promote bamboo diplomacy, particularly from the perspective of the party general secretary's initiatives, while also addressing its continuity with omnidirectional diplomacy and the changing geopolitical context. Section 2 examines how relations with China, the most important and complex bilateral relationship for Vietnam, are being practiced under the policy of bamboo diplomacy. Section 3 analyzes developments in relations with the United States, which are inextricably linked with relations with China. Section 4 examines Vietnam's distinctive friendly and cooperative relationship with Russia, which serves as the direct catalyst for its promotion of bamboo diplomacy. Section 5 analyzes the impact of the domestic issue of anti-corruption campaigns on foreign policy.

¹ Recent studies include Le Hong Hiep, "Vietnam's Foreign Policy: Structure, Evolution, and Contemporary Challenges," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Vietnam*, ed. Jonathan D. London (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), pp. 117–127, as a general overview; Le Hong Hiep and Anton Tsvetov, eds., *Vietnam's Foreign Policy under Doi Moi* (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), which presents an overall picture centered on bilateral relations; Xinru Ma and David C. Kang, "Why Vietnam is not Balancing China: Vietnamese Security Priorities and the Dynamics in Sino-Vietnamese Relations," *Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol. 23 (2023), pp. 363–386, on relations with China; and Ralf Emmers and Huong Le Thu, "Vietnam and the Search for Security Leadership in ASEAN," *Asian Security*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2021), pp. 64–78, on ASEAN diplomacy.

² Phan Xuan Dung and To Minh Son, "What's behind Vietnam's 'Bamboo Diplomacy' Discourse?" *Fulcrum*, July 22, 2022; Nguyen Quoc Tan Trung, "The Problems with Vietnam's 'Bamboo Diplomacy'," *The Diplomat*, September 12, 2022; Nguyen Khac Giang, "The Careful Balancing Act of Vietnam's Bamboo Diplomacy," *East Asia Forum*, December 23, 2022, among others.

³ Alexander Vuving has published an academic article on bamboo diplomacy, but its content focuses narrowly on Vietnam's response to the Ukraine War (Alexander L. Vuving, "Bamboo in a Storm: The Russia-Ukraine War and Vietnam's Foreign Policy (2022–2024)," *The Pacific Review*, May 15, 2024).

⁴ For details on the brief commentaries drawn upon, see the beginning of each section.

1. The Process of Promoting Bamboo Diplomacy: Omnidirectional Diplomacy and Great Power Competition⁵

Bamboo diplomacy was first articulated by General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong of the Communist Party of Vietnam at the 29th Diplomatic Conference (organized by Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs) held in August 2016. In his keynote speech at the conference, General Secretary Trong declared proudly that "Over the past 70 years, ... the external work has recorded many glorious achievements, built a unique diplomatic school imbued with 'Vietnamese bamboo' identity, ... showing the soul and courage of the Vietnamese nation."⁶ Five years later, in a speech at the National Conference on Foreign Affairs hosted by the Politburo and Secretariat in December 2021, General Secretary Trong again invoked bamboo diplomacy. He described it as diplomacy that, like Vietnamese bamboo with "strong roots, a sturdy trunk, and flexible branches," embodies "softness and ingenuity but also resilience and decisiveness; adaptability and creativity but also steadfastness and courage in the face of challenges and difficulties."⁷

In Vietnam's one-party system under the Communist Party, important decisions regarding foreign policy are made by the Politburo.⁸ At the above conference, the Party's stance of leading Vietnam's foreign policy was reaffirmed under the initiative of General Secretary Trong, who was the de facto top leader of Vietnamese politics rather than merely of the Party. Bamboo diplomacy is the basic policy.

Although General Secretary Trong's explanation of bamboo diplomacy is vague and elusive, it essentially signifies balanced diplomacy that maintains strategic autonomy without aligning with any particular country. It does this by adopting flexible policies according to the external environment and domestic circumstances, thereby advancing national interests.

In that sense, bamboo diplomacy represents less the articulation of a new diplomatic policy by General Secretary Trong than a reaffirmation of the efficacy of omnidirectional diplomacy since the adoption of the *Doi Moi* (Renovation) policy. Since launching the *Doi Moi* policy in the late 1980s, which centered on introducing a market economy system and actively entering the international trade system, Vietnamese diplomacy shifted from an approach centered on ideology to practical policies aimed at economic development. Since its formulation at the Seventh National Party Congress in 1991, omnidirectional diplomacy has been the fundamental policy of Vietnamese diplomacy.⁹ The national interests Vietnam seeks to realize through promoting omnidirectional diplomacy are, first and foremost, protecting the Communist Party's one-party system and the

⁵ This section is a significantly revised and expanded version of Shoji Tomotaka, "Taikoku kan Kyoso to Betonamu no 'Take Gaiko': Zenhoi Gaiko no Onkochishin [Great Power Competition and Vietnam's 'Bamboo Diplomacy': Revisiting Omnidirectional Diplomacy]," *Kokusai Joho Network Bunseki IINA* [International Information Network Analysis IINA] (Sasakawa Heiwa Zaidan [The Sasakawa Peace Foundation]), August 31, 2023.

⁶ *Báo Điện tử Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam* [Communist Party of Vietnam Online Newspaper], "Tổng bí thư Nguyễn Phú Trọng dự và phát biểu chỉ đạo tại Hội nghị Ngoại giao lần thứ 29 [General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong Attends and Delivers Guiding Speech at the 29th Diplomatic Conference]," August 22, 2016.

⁷ *Báo Điện tử Chính phủ* [Government Electronic Newspaper], "Toàn văn phát biểu của Tổng Bí thư Nguyễn Phú Trọng tại Hội nghị Đối ngoại Toàn quốc [Full Text of General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's Speech at the National Foreign Relations Conference]," December 14, 2021.

⁸ Le Hong Hiep, "Introduction: The Making of Vietnam's Foreign Policy under *Doi Moi*," in *Vietnam's Foreign Policy under Doi Moi*, ed. Le Hong Hiep and Anton Tsvetov, p. 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

integrity of independence, sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity, and achieving these goals by maintaining a peaceful external environment conducive to economic development.¹⁰

ASEAN has been the foundation for Vietnam's promotion of omnidirectional diplomacy. Vietnam joined ASEAN in 1995 and achieved economic development by being incorporated into its economic cooperation framework. It also secured its own safety by becoming a member of the political and security community while simultaneously enhancing its credibility as a state in the international community.¹¹

While actively engaging in ASEAN's multilateral diplomacy, Vietnam has also developed bilateral-level partnership diplomacy. Aside from Laos and Cambodia, with which Vietnam maintains a "special relationship" valued not only for their importance as neighbors in security terms but also for historical ties dating back to the colonial period, this approach designates the highest level of bilateral relations as a "comprehensive strategic partnership," followed by a "strategic partnership" and a "comprehensive partnership." In light of the significance of omnidirectional diplomacy in building friendly and cooperative relations with all countries, the essence of Vietnamese diplomacy is to advance the diversification and multilateralization of diplomacy with the ultimate aim of concluding comprehensive strategic partnerships with all countries.¹² Vietnam currently has comprehensive strategic partnerships with fourteen countries: China, Russia, India, South Korea, the United States, Japan, Australia, France, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, and the United Kingdom.

At the root of this omnidirectional approach to diplomacy lies Vietnam's flexible thinking. This is expressed in the paired concepts of "objects of cooperation" and "objects of struggle," which do not judge a target country as either enemy or ally as a whole, but rather identify both aspects of cooperation and struggle within that country and engage flexibly according to circumstances and situations. This way of thinking has provided the theoretical foundation for building flexible and balanced relationships with China and the United States.¹³ Moreover, omnidirectionality, in the sense of not aligning with any particular country, leads to the concept of non-alignment, particularly in security matters. The basic policy of Vietnam's national defense is formulated as the "Four Nos" (no participation in military alliances, no siding with one country to act against another, no foreign military bases on Vietnamese territory or using Vietnam as leverage to counteract other countries, and no using force or threatening to use force in international relations).¹⁴

Vietnam in the *Doi Moi* era promoted omnidirectional diplomacy and built broad cooperative relationships with countries around the world. The stable external environment created through diverse, multifaceted cooperative relationships greatly contributed to Vietnam's economic development. Bamboo diplomacy lies along the continuum of omnidirectional diplomacy but requires even greater flexibility and agility against the backdrop of intensifying great power

¹⁰ Vuving, "Bamboo in a Storm," p. 6.

¹¹ Vũ Hò, "Dấu ấn Việt Nam trong ASEAN: Đồng hành, lớn mạnh cùng năm tháng [Vietnam's Imprint in ASEAN: Accompanying and Growing Together Over the Years]," *Tạp chí Cộng sản* [Communist Review], October 23, 2023.

¹² Shoji Tomotaka, *Minamishinakai Mondai no Kozu: Chuetsu Funso kara Takokukan Tairitsu e* [Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea: Approaches of ASEAN, Vietnam, and the Philippines] (Nagoya: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai [Nagoya University Press], 2022), p. 187.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 127–128.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 243.

competition. Amid the sharpening U.S.-China confrontation, Vietnam, like other ASEAN countries, needs to skillfully avoid situations where it is forced to make a binary choice between the United States and China, and bamboo diplomacy provides the logic for doing so.¹⁵

Russia's invasion of Ukraine made the confrontation between the West and the China-Russia bloc even clearer. Consequently, for Vietnam, which has built distinctive bilateral relationships with the United States, China, and Russia, how to calibrate its distance from each has become increasingly complex. Supporting the general principles of international law regarding respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity while refusing to condemn Russia, Vietnam faces the risk of criticism from the West, while domestic public opinion is divided between pro-Russia and anti-Russia positions. Under these circumstances, bamboo diplomacy underpins Vietnam's position regarding the Ukraine situation.¹⁶

Indeed, since 2022, bamboo diplomacy has been vigorously promoted by Vietnam's state-controlled media. Moreover, Vietnamese media, presumably under government direction, have conducted a "bamboo diplomacy campaign" that interviews overseas experts and showcases positive evaluations of Vietnam's diplomatic stance.¹⁷ By featuring these interviews, they broadcast to both foreign and domestic audiences the spectacle of overseas experts endorsing Vietnam's diplomatic style.

In fact, the "originator" of bamboo diplomacy is Thailand. As Southeast Asia was successively colonized by Western powers, Thailand preserved its independence by playing Britain and France against each other, and after the war maintained strategic autonomy by flexibly switching cooperative relationships with major powers; bamboo diplomacy has been praised as a traditional style of Thai diplomacy.¹⁸ Vietnam's bamboo diplomacy also follows Thailand's flexibility and pragmatism, but Vietnamese scholars argue a crucial difference: whereas Thailand switched its cooperative partner from the United States to China, Vietnam maintains equidistance from all major countries including the United States and China, maximizes economic benefits, and hedges against strategic uncertainty.¹⁹

¹⁵ Dung and Son, "What's Behind Vietnam's 'Bamboo Diplomacy' Discourse?"

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *Thanh niên* [Young People], June 29, 2023.

¹⁸ Aoki-Okabe Maki, "'Take no Gaiko' kara 'Tagenteki Gaiko' e: Sengo Tai Gaiko Saiko no tameno Ronten Seiri to Kadai Teiji [Revisiting Bamboo Diplomacy: A Literature Review for Rethinking Thailand's Postwar Diplomacy]," *Ajia Keizai* [Bi-monthly journal of the Institute of Asian Economic Affairs], vol. 64, no. 2 (June 2023), pp. 23–28.

¹⁹ Dung and Son, "What's Behind Vietnam's 'Bamboo Diplomacy' Discourse?" "Hedging" is a financial term meaning to mitigate risk, but in diplomacy and security, it refers to managing risks in foreign relations by diversifying them. This involves building cooperative relationships not only with China but with various countries, especially the United States; advancing economic cooperation with China while deepening cooperative relations with the United States primarily in security, thereby highlighting the strategic ambidexterity and flexibility. (Evelyn Goh, "Introduction," in *Betwixt and Between: Southeast Asian Strategic Relations with the U.S. and China*, ed. Evelyn Goh, IDSS Monograph no. 7 [Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2005], p. 1).

2. The Practice of Bamboo Diplomacy: “Deference” to China²⁰

In practicing bamboo diplomacy, the relationship Vietnam most carefully calibrates is that with China. Vietnam demonstrates an attitude of “deference” toward China. “Deference” is an attitude China demands from Vietnam in exchange for allowing Vietnam a certain degree of autonomy, premised on the absolute asymmetry of the Vietnam-China relationship.²¹ Put simply, it means demonstrating through clear actions that Vietnam prioritizes China over any other country at critical junctures in its foreign relations.

Against the backdrop of intensifying strategic competition with the United States, China is moving to bring Vietnam into its orbit. Consequently, even in the South China Sea where territorial claims are sharply contested, China concentrates primarily on pressuring the Philippines while easing pressure on Vietnam. Moreover, Chinese corporate investment in Vietnam has surged, and in 2023, China’s investment combined with Hong Kong ranked first in terms of investment volume among all countries.²² The growing economic importance of China is also one of the main motivations for Vietnam, which aims for steady economic development, to stabilize relations with China.

Despite its history of fierce wars with France, the United States, and China, and its strong image of courageously confronting great powers, for Vietnam, showing appropriate deference to China is a “wisdom for survival” and nothing new. Particularly after normalizing relations with China in 1991, following the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War and the severe confrontation of the 1980s, Vietnam has avoided frontal collisions with China, compromised where possible, and advanced cooperation where feasible.²³

In practice, Vietnam energetically engaged in top-level diplomacy and devoted considerable effort to stabilizing relations with China. From late October to early November 2022, General Secretary Trong officially visited China. This was his fourth visit to China since taking office and his first foreign trip in his third term. General Secretary Trong, already elderly and rarely traveling abroad due to health concerns, made an exception for China. Furthermore, this visit was the first visit to China by a national leader after the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, and Vietnam, which “rushed to offer congratulations immediately after the successful Party Congress,” symbolically demonstrated its attitude of deference to China.²⁴

In his meeting with President Xi Jinping, General Secretary Trong stated that “the traditional friendship of being both comrades and brothers, which has been built and cultivated by President Ho Chi Minh, Chairman Mao Zedong, and other senior leaders, is a valuable asset of the two peoples,” emphasizing how important China is to Vietnam.²⁵

²⁰ This section is a significantly revised and expanded version of Shoji Tomotaka, “Betonamu no Taichu Seisaku: Kyojun to Kensei [Vietnam’s China Policy: Deference and Check],” *Kokusai Joho Network Bunseki IINA* (Sasakawa Heiwa Zaidan), February 5, 2024.

²¹ Alexander L. Vuving, “Strategy and Evolution of Vietnam’s China Policy: A Changing Mixture of Pathways,” *Asian Survey*, vol. 46, no. 6 (November/December 2006), p. 808.

²² Reuters, December 8, 2023.

²³ Shoji Tomotaka, “Minamimishinakai Mondai no Genzaichi: ASEAN Shokoku no Taio kara [The Current State of the South China Sea Issue: From the Responses of ASEAN Countries],” *Toa* [East Asia], no. 682 (April 2024), p. 14.

²⁴ *Nhân dân* [The People], October 28, 2022.

²⁵ *Nhân dân*, October 31, 2022.

About one year after General Secretary Trong's visit to China, in December 2023, President Xi Jinping made his third, and the first in these six years, visit to Vietnam. The Vietnamese side entertained President Xi with the full political leadership mobilized: first, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh greeted him at Noi Bai International Airport in Hanoi; then, General Secretary Trong hosted him continuously for two days; meetings were held with President Vo Van Thuong and courtesy calls were received from National Assembly Chair Vuong Dinh Hue; and finally, Chairman Hue saw him off at the airport.

The joint statement during President Xi's visit to Vietnam was titled "Continuing to Deepen the Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership and Build a Vietnam-China Community with a Shared Future." At the 15th anniversary milestone since establishing the comprehensive strategic partnership of cooperation in 2008, Vietnam and China agreed to elevate bilateral relations to another level, thereby differentiating them from comprehensive strategic partnerships with other countries.²⁶

At this time, the two countries agreed on as many as 36 cooperation documents. Among them, in addition to diplomatic and security cooperation such as an agreement on deepening cooperation between foreign ministries and a memorandum of cooperation between defense ministries on joint patrols of the maritime boundary in the Gulf of Tonkin, agreement documents related to China's Belt and Road Initiative and the "Two Corridors, One Belt" initiative that China emphasizes for advancing bilateral Vietnam-China infrastructure development cooperation were signed. Notable among these were an agreement to build a bridge over the Hong River connecting the two countries in the Vietnam-China border region of Lao Cai in northern Vietnam, and a memorandum between Vietnam's Ministry of Construction and China's International Development Cooperation Agency to advance railway development connecting the two countries' borders, suggesting progress in large-scale infrastructure development cooperation with China that Vietnam had traditionally avoided.²⁷

Regarding Taiwan, it was explicitly stated that Vietnam expressed firm support for the One-China principle, recognized that Taiwan is an inseparable part of China's territory, resolutely opposed "Taiwan independence" as a separatist attempt, and supported the principle of non-interference in internal affairs.²⁸

Vietnam is well aware that China's restraint in the South China Sea is merely a temporary expedient that could shift to aggressive behavior at any time. While Chinese corporate investment is indispensable for Vietnam's economic growth, excessive economic dependence on the "northern giant" is undesirable from the perspective of strategic autonomy. However, Vietnam considers it acceptable to contribute to stabilizing relations, even temporarily, by accommodating China and giving consideration to its wishes. Therefore, on the occasion of Xi's visit to Vietnam, Vietnam demonstrated an accommodating posture toward China through actions such as elevating the comprehensive strategic partnership to another level, promoting infrastructure cooperation, and aligning on the Taiwan issue.

²⁶ *Nhân dân*, December 13, 2023.

²⁷ *Báo Điện tử Chính phủ*, "Việt Nam, Trung Quốc ký kết 36 văn bản thỏa thuận hợp tác [Vietnam and China Sign 36 Cooperation Agreement Documents]," December 12, 2023.

²⁸ *Nhân dân*, December 13, 2023.

3. The United States as a Hedge

While engaging with China on a case-by-case basis, Vietnam hedges this relationship through cooperative relationships with other countries to preserve its strategic autonomy. This approach has been made possible through its pursuit of omnidirectional diplomacy.²⁹ Vietnam's most important hedge is the United States. Fifty years after the Vietnam War and 30 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations, the United States has become a critically important partner for the country both strategically and economically. Security cooperation with the United States is essential for Vietnam as it faces tensions with China in the South China Sea. The United States is also Vietnam's largest export market. Politically, however, the two countries differ substantially in values and systems. For the United States as well, Vietnam represents an important cooperative partner in realizing its Indo-Pacific strategy—given that it is a South China Sea claimant state with a growing presence due to steady economic growth that also harbors deep-seated historical distrust of China.³⁰

Vietnam's bamboo diplomacy has also bent flexibly with winds from the United States, achieving a major milestone in bilateral relations in 2023: the conclusion of a comprehensive strategic partnership. At the end of March 2023, General Secretary Trong and President Joe Biden held a telephone conversation, during which the two countries apparently reached an agreement in principle on concluding a comprehensive strategic partnership.³¹ The following April, when Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken visited Vietnam and paid a courtesy call on General Secretary Trong, the general secretary spoke highly of the telephone conversation with President Biden and indicated that a foundation had been laid for elevating bilateral relations.³² Secretary Blinken's visit to Vietnam was widely seen as paving the way for President Biden's visit.³³

Indeed, in September of the same year, President Biden visited Vietnam, and the two countries announced the conclusion of a comprehensive strategic partnership. This marked the 10th anniversary of the comprehensive partnership established in 2013, and represented an exceptional two-level upgrade that skipped the intermediate strategic partnership stage. The two countries also agreed to cooperate on restructuring U.S.-led semiconductor and rare earth supply chains, with the United States committing to support the development of Vietnam's semiconductor industry and rare earth resources.³⁴

Through the practice of bamboo diplomacy, Vietnam has successfully built relationships that advance cooperation equally with the United States and China. However, as U.S.-China rivalry intensifies, this balance is being pursued with extreme delicacy. Before concluding the comprehensive strategic partnership with the United States, General Secretary Trong needed to visit China first to clearly signal that relations with China remained most important for Vietnam; the subsequent elevation of the Vietnam-China comprehensive strategic partnership during President

²⁹ Le Hong Hiep, "Vietnam's Hedging Strategy against China since Normalization," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2013), p. 341.

³⁰ Nguyen Khac Giang, "U.S.-Vietnam Relations: Ready for a Strategic Partnership Upgrade?" *Fulcrum*, April 20, 2023.

³¹ *Nhân dân*, March 30, 2023.

³² *Nhân dân*, April 15, 2023.

³³ Giang, "U.S.-Vietnam Relations."

³⁴ The White House, "Fact Sheet: President Joseph R. Biden and General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong Announce the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," September 10, 2023.

Xi's visit to Vietnam after President Biden's visit served as a follow-up to this.

One reason Vietnam's bamboo diplomacy is succeeding amid the U.S.-China rivalry is that both powers recognize the importance of cooperation with Vietnam for their respective regional strategies. In a sense, Vietnam is reaping benefits from U.S.-China competition; yet it does not take for granted that such a favorable balance will continue. Deepening economic dependence on China leaves Vietnam vulnerable to economic pressure from Beijing, while tensions in the South China Sea can reignite at any time. Meanwhile, whether U.S. policy toward Vietnam will progress smoothly remains uncertain. Vietnam is working to buy time to build up its own capabilities, centered on economic strength, to enhance strategic autonomy while advancing omnidirectional relationship-building as much as possible around its relations with the United States and China.

4. The Unique Friendly and Cooperative Relationship with Russia and Its Instability³⁵

Since launching its military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia has been subjected to continuous international condemnation. On the other hand, there are a number of countries that support Russia or show understanding toward the country. Vietnam is one of them. While Vietnam does not openly express support for Russia in the international arena, it does not join in the condemnation of or sanctions against Russia. Vietnam's attitude is typically manifested in its voting behavior at the United Nations General Assembly. From the March 2022 resolution calling on Russia to immediately cease military operations in Ukraine to the July 2024 resolution calling for the return of control of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant to Ukraine, Vietnam has abstained on all votes, though it has not voted against them.³⁶

There are historical reasons why Vietnam shows strong consideration for Russia. Russia has been one of the most important countries for Vietnam since the Soviet era during the Cold War. During this period, when Vietnam fought its protracted wars of independence and unification through the First Indochina War and the Vietnam War, the Soviet Union, as the leader of the socialist camp, served as the ideological foundation for Vietnamese communists. Moreover, particularly during the Vietnam War, the Soviet Union provided massive military, economic, and food assistance to North Vietnam, making this support indispensable for its prosecution of the war.

After the Vietnam War, Vietnam became isolated in the international community following its invasion of Cambodia and the subsequent Sino-Vietnamese War, but even then, the Soviet Union maintained its alliance with Vietnam and continued to provide military and economic support. Vietnam still feels a sense of "obligation" for this support during the Soviet era. During this period, many Vietnamese studied in the Soviet Union and now occupy central positions in Vietnam's political, military, and academic institutions. Due to these circumstances, many Vietnamese still have a strong affinity for Russia.³⁷ Even after the Cold War, Vietnam maintained friendly and cooperative relations with Russia, establishing a strategic partnership in 2001. This relationship

³⁵ This section is a significantly revised and expanded version of Shoji Tomotaka, "Betonamu to Roshia: Ukuraina Josei kara Ukabiagaru Kankeisei [Vietnam and Russia: The Relationship Emerging from the Ukraine Situation]," *NIDS Commentary*, no. 228, June 14, 2022.

³⁶ Vietnam cast a negative vote only on the April 2022 UN General Assembly resolution (suspending Russia's membership in the Human Rights Council) (*UN News*, "UN General Assembly Votes to Suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council," April 22, 2022).

³⁷ To Minh Son, "Explaining the Vietnamese Public's Mixed Responses to the Russian-Ukraine Crisis," *The Diplomat*, March 18, 2022.

was elevated to a comprehensive strategic partnership as early as 2012.³⁸

For Russia as well, Vietnam has been a long-standing strategic partner in Southeast Asia. From 1979 to 2002, a Soviet (and later Russian) naval base was located in Cam Ranh Bay, a strategic point in the South China Sea, providing the Soviet Union and Russia with a strategic foothold in Southeast Asia. Vietnam is also a “valued customer” of the Russian arms business, ranking fifth in the world and first in Southeast Asia as a destination for Russian equipment exports, with Russian-made equipment accounting for more than 80 percent of the equipment Vietnam has procured over the past 30 years. Major equipment of the Vietnam People’s Army, such as Kilo-class submarines, Sukhoi fighter aircraft, and Gepard-class frigates, is almost entirely Russian-made.³⁹

Typically, cooperation with equipment suppliers on maintenance and training is essential even after deployment. Vietnam is no exception, and Russia has conducted training for the Vietnam People’s Army, primarily focusing on the navy, and has performed maintenance and repair of equipment that Vietnam procured from Russia. Russia was also involved in the construction of training and logistics facilities during the development of the Vietnamese naval base at Cam Ranh Bay. Furthermore, Vietnam has received support from Russia for the development of its own defense industry, such as building corvettes and patrol vessels with technology provided by Russia.⁴⁰ At defense ministerial talks held in Moscow in December 2021, an agreement on military-technical cooperation was signed, and the two countries confirmed the continuation and strengthening of this technical cooperation.⁴¹

Russia has also played an important role in Vietnam’s energy development. In the two countries’ comprehensive strategic partnership, cooperation in the energy sector is one of the priority issues. Specifically, Russia supports Vietnam in power plant construction, liquefied natural gas supply, renewable energy utilization, and engine fuel production, with various projects involving participation by state-owned oil company Petrovietnam and Russian energy-related companies such as Zarubezhneft, Gazprom, Novatek, and Rosatom.⁴² In relation to this, the two countries are also strengthening cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear energy, with plans underway to build a Nuclear Science and Technology Research Center in Vietnam with Russian support, and programs implemented for Russian universities to accept Vietnamese students to train specialists. Russia has been a priority cooperative partner in Vietnam’s nuclear power development plan.⁴³

Vietnam refrained from high-level exchanges with Russia immediately after the outbreak of the Ukraine War, but gradually resumed accepting such visits in 2023. In May of that year, Dmitry Medvedev, leader of the United Russia party and deputy chairman of the Security Council, officially visited Vietnam and met with General Secretary Trong. In the meeting, the Vietnamese

³⁸ Shoji, *Minamimishinakai Mondai no Kozu*, p. 196.

³⁹ Le Hong Hiep, “Will Vietnam Be Able to Wean Itself Off Russian Arms?” *Fulcrum*, April 4, 2022.

⁴⁰ Shoji, *Minamimishinakai Mondai no Kozu*, p. 197.

⁴¹ *Báo Điện tử Chính phủ*, “Việt Nam - Liên Bang Nga: Thúc đẩy hơn nữa hợp tác quốc phòng, kỹ thuật quân sự [Vietnam - Russian Federation: Further Promoting Defense and Military-Technical Cooperation],” December 2, 2021.

⁴² *Báo Điện tử Chính phủ*, “Việt Nam - Liên Bang Nga: Thúc đẩy hơn nữa hợp tác quốc phòng, kỹ thuật quân sự [Vietnam - Russian Federation: Further Promoting Defense and Military-Technical Cooperation],” December 2, 2021.

⁴³ *Tập đoàn Điện lực Việt Nam* [Vietnam Electricity Group], “Tăng cường hợp tác trong lĩnh vực năng lượng giữa Việt Nam – Liên bang Nga [Strengthening Cooperation in the Energy Sector between Vietnam and the Russian Federation],” December 3, 2021.

side expressed its commitment to valuing the traditional friendly relationship and comprehensive strategic partnership with Russia.⁴⁴ The following June, Supreme Court Chairman Vyacheslav Lebedev visited Vietnam and paid a courtesy call on President Thuong. During the courtesy call, Chairman Lebedev conveyed to President Thuong a message from President Vladimir Putin that Russia always values cooperative relations with Vietnam and that relations with Vietnam have high priority as a comprehensive strategic partner.⁴⁵

The culmination was President Putin's visit to Vietnam. In October 2023, when President Thuong visited Beijing to participate in the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, he met with President Putin. During the meeting, President Thuong invited President Putin to visit Vietnam on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the signing of the Vietnam-Russia Treaty on Principles of Friendly Relations.⁴⁶ Accepting the invitation, President Putin officially visited Vietnam in June 2024 and met with all four top political leaders (Communist Party general secretary, president, prime minister, and National Assembly chairman). President Putin's visit to Vietnam was highly symbolic, and there were no particular new agreements between the two countries. However, for Russia, which is in sharp confrontation with the West over Ukraine, it was significant that Vietnam, a major Southeast Asian country, clearly demonstrated its stance of maintaining friendly and cooperative relations with Russia. The joint declaration explicitly stated that "Russia highly values Vietnam's balanced and objective stance on the Ukraine issue," reaffirming Vietnam's position of showing understanding for Russia's stance.⁴⁷

Vietnam is thus practicing bamboo diplomacy in its relations with Russia as well. However, the risks for Vietnam of maintaining relations with Russia in this manner are growing.

First is the risk of deteriorating relations with the United States. Prior to Putin's visit, a spokesperson for the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi expressed displeasure and warned Vietnam, stating that "No country should give Putin a platform to promote his war of aggression and otherwise allow him to normalize his atrocities," and that "If he is able to travel freely, it could normalize Russia's blatant violations of international law."⁴⁸ While the United States demonstrated its emphasis on relations with Vietnam by dispatching Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel J. Kritenbrink to Hanoi the day after Putin's visit to Vietnam, it decided in August to withhold recognition of Vietnam as a market economy country, which Vietnam had long strongly sought.⁴⁹ Vietnam's maintenance of friendly and cooperative relations with Russia could lead to sacrificing the economic and strategic benefits obtained from relations with the United States.

Second is the decline in Russia's practical significance. In the South China Sea, despite persistent interference by China, Russia has continued joint resource development with Vietnam. This was enabled by the power balance between the two countries, in which China could not be too

⁴⁴ *Nhân dân*, May 22, 2023.

⁴⁵ *Nhân dân*, June 19, 2023.

⁴⁶ *Báo Điện tử Chính phủ*, "Chủ tịch nước Võ Văn Thưởng gặp Tổng thống Liên bang Nga Vladimir Putin [President Vo Van Thuong Meets Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin]," October 17, 2023.

⁴⁷ *Nhân dân*, June 20, 2024.

⁴⁸ Reuters, June 17, 2024.

⁴⁹ Reuters, June 21; August 3, 2024.

high-handed toward Russia.⁵⁰ However, following the invasion of Ukraine and the intensification of confrontation with the West, Russia's rapprochement with China has advanced. In a situation that can be described as Russia's subordination to China, Vietnam can no longer rely on Russia in the South China Sea.

Vietnam has also begun to experience difficulties in procuring equipment from Russia. After the 2014 Crimea conflict and with the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) enacted by the United States in 2017, incentives were created for Vietnam to seek procurement sources other than Russia. Following the invasion of Ukraine, economic sanctions against Russia, particularly the exclusion of Russia from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT), made payments difficult, and from the perspective of reputation in the international community, Vietnam has been increasingly pressured to de-Russify. However, it is also true that dependence on Russia cannot be easily resolved due to interoperability with currently deployed Russian-made equipment and procurement prices appropriate for Vietnam.⁵¹

Third is the ethical dilemma Vietnam faces. Vietnam has a history of having its territory ravaged by great powers such as France and the United States in the anti-French anti-colonial war (First Indochina War) and the anti-American national salvation war (Vietnam War), and historical memories of civilian casualties remain, such as the My Lai massacre. In light of its own experience, the stance of strongly demanding respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and international law can be called a national policy, and in this case Vietnam is precisely in a position where it should defend Ukraine and condemn Russia. In fact, Vietnamese citizens have high interest in the situation in Ukraine, particularly regarding civilian casualties. Although Vietnamese media are under government control, the killing of civilians in Bucha was widely reported, though with consideration shown toward Russia. It is said that Vietnam's abstention at the United Nations General Assembly in March 2022 drew much criticism from citizens.⁵²

Moreover, Russia's launch of the invasion under the pretext of protecting Russians within Ukrainian territory evokes painful memories for Vietnam. These include the Sino-Vietnamese War, in which China invaded Vietnamese territory in 1979 under the pretext of protecting ethnic Chinese in Vietnam, and the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, where China asserts "historic rights" and is in sharp confrontation with Vietnam.⁵³

⁵⁰ Vuving, "Bamboo in a Storm," pp. 11–12.

⁵¹ Hiep, "Will Vietnam Be Able to Wean Itself Off Russian Arms?"

⁵² Dien Nguyen An Luong and Amirul Adli Rosli, "Vietnam Netizens Reactions at Odds with Vietnam's Stance on Ukraine," *Fulcrum*, March 16, 2022.

⁵³ Hai Hong Nguyen, "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: The Diplomatic Dilemma Facing Vietnam," *The Diplomat*, March 4, 2022.

5. Domestic Factors in Promoting Bamboo Diplomacy: Anti-Corruption Campaigns and the “Conservatization” of Foreign Policy⁵⁴

Bamboo diplomacy is also influenced by Vietnam's domestic political circumstances. In May 2024, Vietnam's National Assembly convened an extraordinary session and passed a resolution to dismiss National Assembly Chairman Hue. Just over one month earlier, President Thuong had likewise been dismissed. In Vietnam's political leadership appointments, resignations or replacements occurring mid-term rather than at the time of Party congresses held every five years are historically exceptional. However, in recent circumstances, such exceptional situations have rather become normalized.

The resignation drama of the political leadership consisting of the four top political positions called the “Four Pillars” (*Tứ trụ*)—Communist Party general secretary, president, prime minister, and National Assembly chairman—began in 2023. In January of that year, President Nguyen Xuan Phuc resigned and was replaced by Thuong, who was a member of the Politburo and standing secretary of the Party Secretariat. Just over one year later, President Thuong resigned, and one month after that, National Assembly Chairman Hue resigned. The political leadership inaugurated at the 13th National Party Congress in 2021 saw three of its four members replaced within three years, making this replacement of members of the political leadership through resignations rather than deaths mid-term not only unprecedented in nature but also in frequency.

The resignation drama was not limited to the political leadership but extended to its periphery. Just before President Phuc's resignation, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh and Deputy Prime Minister Vu Duc Dam resigned; in January 2024, just before President Thuong's resignation, Politburo member Tran Tuan Anh resigned; and immediately after National Assembly Chairman Hue's resignation, Standing Secretary of the Secretariat and Head of the Central Organization Commission Truong Thi Mai resigned. This meant that six members, representing one-third of the 18 Politburo members elected at the 13th National Party Congress, had resigned.⁵⁵

Behind the successive resignation drama was the anti-corruption campaign vigorously promoted by Communist Party General Secretary Trong. This is called the “Blazing Furnace” campaign (*chiến dịch đốt lò*), which began immediately after General Secretary Trong took office and has continued for over 10 years to date. The campaign intensified in recent years, with the direct cause being two large-scale corruption scandals against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first was a corruption case involving COVID-19 test kits by a medical equipment manufacturer, resulting in the arrest of as many as 100 manufacturer personnel and public officials, including the chairman of the Hanoi People's Committee and the Minister of Health. The second was a case involving the authorization of special repatriation flights operated in place of regular flights suspended during the pandemic, leading to the arrest of more than 30 people, including the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and

⁵⁴ This section is a significantly revised and expanded version of Shoji Tomotaka, “Betonamu no Naisei to Gaiko: Seiji Shidobu no Aitsugu Jinin to Taigai Seisaku eno Eikyo [Vietnam's Domestic and Foreign Policies: Successive Leadership Resignations and Their Impact on Foreign Policy],” *Kokusai Joho Network Bunseki* (Sasakawa Heiwa Zaidan), July 2, 2024.

⁵⁵ “Kyosanto Shidobu no Joretsu Goi ga Jinin, Tosoku Ihan ni Towareru (Betonamu) [Fifth-Ranking Member of Communist Party Leadership Resigns, Charged with Party Rule Violations (Vietnam)],” *JETRO Business News*, May 24, 2024.

other ministries as well as travel agency employees.⁵⁶ The resignations of the two aforementioned deputy prime ministers were accountability resignations, with Deputy Prime Minister Dam being held accountable for supervising the Ministry of Health and Deputy Prime Minister Minh for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. President Phuc's resignation was an extension of this, while President Thuong's and National Assembly Chairman Hue's resignations took responsibility for separate corruption cases.

Thus, a "culture of resignation"—whereby one resigns taking responsibility when serious corruption cases occur in organizations or among individuals under one's jurisdiction—was semi-forcibly established through General Secretary Trong's initiative.⁵⁷

While the anti-corruption campaign was intended to discipline and maintain public trust in the Party, it simultaneously took on the character of a power struggle. General Secretary Trong, serving an exceptional third term and elderly with health concerns being discussed, was highly likely to be replaced at the 14th National Party Congress scheduled for 2026. Before the successive resignations of the political leadership, former Chairman Hue and former President Thuong were considered strong candidates for the next general secretary. However, with their departures, President (former Minister of Public Security) To Lam rapidly emerged as a strong candidate. As Minister of Public Security, President Lam demonstrated formidable capability as General Secretary Trong's right-hand man in the anti-corruption campaign, successively uncovering major corruption cases. It is believed that this track record was evaluated positively and led to his promotion to the presidency.

Since the *Doi Moi* policy of the mid-1980s, the Vietnamese economy has achieved remarkable development, but what Vietnam promoted to attract the foreign direct investment that became its driving force was political stability. Vietnam, under the one-party dictatorship of the Communist Party, reinterpreted its unchanging political system and orderly replacement of political leadership at Party Congresses as "stability," and argued that the continuity of this political environment was conducive to foreign investment. As the anti-corruption campaign intensified, that stability was shaken. There were no direct signs of declining foreign investment or capital flight due to aversion to political instability, but Vietnam watchers raised concerns that such situations could arise.⁵⁸

A more obvious adverse effect emerging from the anti-corruption campaign was the paralysis of the bureaucratic apparatus. Bureaucrats were reportedly hesitant about administrative procedures out of fear of being exposed. Additionally, phenomena were occurring such as administrative officials in authorization chains being arrested and procedures being delayed.⁵⁹

Even amid the intensification of the anti-corruption campaign and political instability, there was no change in the basic policy of bamboo diplomacy itself. In his inaugural speech,

⁵⁶ Ishizuka Futaba and Sakata Shozo, "2022 Nen no Betonamu: Daikibo Oshoku Jiken ni Yureru Ippo de Kodo Seicho wo Tassei [Vietnam in 2022: Anti-corruption Fight Intensified amid Economic Recovery]," in *Ajia Doko Nenpo 2023* [*Asian Trends Annual Report 2023*], ed. Ajia Keizai Kenkyujo [Institute of Developing Economies, IDE-JETRO] (Tokyo: Ajia Keizai Kenkyujo [Institute of Developing Economies]), pp. 199–200.

⁵⁷ Ishizuka Futaba, "Betonamu Kokka Shuseki Jiningeki ni Miru Han Oshoku Toso no Ronri [The Logic of Vietnam's Anti-corruption Campaign Observed from the "Resignation" of the President]," IDE Square *Sekai wo Miru Me* [Eyes on the World] (Ajia Keizai Kenkyujo [Institute of Developing Economies, IDE-JETRO]), February 2023.

⁵⁸ Le Hong Hiep, "Two Presidents Ousted in One Year: What Lies Ahead for Vietnam's Political Outlook?" *Fulcrum*, March 20, 2024.

⁵⁹ *Nikkei Shimbun* [Nikkei Newspaper], June 9, 2024.

President Lam also stated that he would "Firmly and effectively implement the foreign policy of multilateralization and diversification of foreign relations, imbued with the diplomatic identity of 'Bamboo Vietnam', [and] proactively and actively integrate into the international community," explicitly declaring the continuation of the Trong-era line.⁶⁰ President Lam practiced bamboo diplomacy by orchestrating President Putin's visit to Vietnam and meeting with the U.S. ambassador.

However, the nuances of how the bamboo sways are influenced by domestic circumstances. Due to the transition of power, the political leadership could not afford to deal effectively with instability in foreign relations, particularly relations with China. Therefore, Vietnam emphasized an attitude of deference to China in particular. Even in the South China Sea, which harbored potential tensions, Vietnam strictly refrained from taking a strong stance toward China.

On the other hand, bold moves in foreign relations also became subdued. Relations with the United States, with which Vietnam established a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2023, saw no major progress since. Rather, moves to reconfirm the traditional relationship with Russia were conspicuous. Vietnam, which prioritized stabilizing relations with China and Russia, combined with the concentration of power in General Secretary Trong as a conservative ideologue, demonstrated Vietnam's "conservatization" on both internal and external fronts.

Conclusion: The Death of General Secretary Trong, the Birth of a New General Secretary, and the Future of Bamboo Diplomacy

On July 19, 2024, General Secretary Trong passed away. This occurred shortly after it was announced that President Lam would assume the duties of general secretary so that he could focus on treatment. His death, immediately following the announcement of medical leave, marked an abrupt yet dramatic end to the 13-year Trong administration.

Immediately afterward, President Lam's appointment as general secretary was announced. The new General Secretary Lam promptly visited China just over two weeks after taking office. The hurried visit to China prompted various speculation, but it was said that before meeting President Biden at the United Nations General Assembly in September, it was necessary for him to meet with China's top leader and demonstrate an attitude of deference to China.⁶¹ Indeed, in the same month, General Secretary Lam met with President Biden in New York.⁶² Bamboo diplomacy as the legacy of former General Secretary Trong continues under the Lam administration. The newly installed General Secretary Lam needs to consolidate his domestic power base and cannot afford to have pending issues in foreign relations. In this sense as well, there is ample reason to continue bamboo diplomacy.

Thus, Vietnam flexibly bends with the winds blowing from the great powers, continuing its bilateral engagement with China, the United States, and Russia respectively. Its omnidirectionality remains comprehensive, as evidenced by the conclusion of comprehensive strategic partnerships with Japan and Australia. In doing so, Vietnam demonstrates an attitude of prioritizing relations with China while building relationships with the United States and others. By Vietnam observing the priority order of its foreign relations, China "tolerates" Vietnam's advancement of relations with the

⁶⁰ *Nhân dân*, May 22, 2024.

⁶¹ *BBC Tiếng Việt* [BBC Vietnamese], August 19, 2024.

⁶² *Nhân dân*, September 26, 2024.

United States. Vietnam's bamboo diplomacy is established through this "tacit understanding" with China. Many countries buffeted by U.S.-China rivalry aim for balanced "equidistant diplomacy," but in reality, their policies toward both China and the United States inevitably become nuanced according to their specific circumstances.

For now, Vietnam's bamboo shows no signs of breaking and maintains well-balanced foreign relations. But could it break if too strong a wind blows? As tensions among great powers have deepened with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Vietnam's deference to China has intensified, while its approach to strengthening relations with the United States has become increasingly cautious, and maintaining relations with Russia has come to involve mounting risks. If the confrontation between the West and the China-Russia axis intensifies further, it will gradually become more difficult for Vietnam to maintain an approach that pleases all parties. The direction of the new U.S. administration is also a concern. However, a binary choice is the option Vietnam most wishes to avoid. Therefore, even as great power rivalry intensifies, Vietnam will likely pursue balance to the greatest extent possible by utilizing every available means.