

Vietnam to continue playing the diplomatic field

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Author: Min Van Pham, VNU

Vietnam has recently upped its diplomatic efforts to strengthen relations with major powers by signing comprehensive and strategic partnership agreements. The underlying diplomatic philosophy is to create interdependent relations with as many major powers as possible, while avoiding taking sides. And whether or not the benefits outweigh the costs, Vietnam is unlikely to change course any time soon.



The first reason is the structural power transition between the United States and China in the Asia Pacific. Vietnam has special relations with both the United States and [China](#)^[1], but while this power transition is uncertain, definitively choosing sides is not wise. The fact is that China has emerged as a global power, but whether its rise will be peaceful and whether it can become a truly global superpower remains to be seen. International relations theorists are split on how China will wield its geopolitical power. Some argue that China will become a revisionist power while others are optimistic that it will become a responsible stakeholder. The latter reason that Beijing will have no reason to undermine the current international order as it underlies China's growth.

Second, a series of emerging complex international issues — particularly security issues — make a strategy that relies on one major alliance risky. By [engaging in multi-power diplomacy](#)^[2], Vietnam avoids being roped into certain commitments with its partners in international affairs. It can avoid a situation in which it has to compromise relations with one partner for another. But Hanoi is still be able to present itself as a responsible player: for example, it participates in international joint efforts led by the United Nations.

Despite the ongoing structural power transition in the Asia Pacific, other regional powers such as India and Indonesia have started to emerge as critical players in international politics. As these powers redefine and expand their global interests, changing dynamics may bring about conflicts among them and other states. If Hanoi commits itself to one power over others, it may put Vietnam in a tight spot if any conflicts do arise.

A desire for political autonomy also encourages Vietnam to maintain its current diplomatic philosophy. Vietnam has repeatedly affirmed the socialist-oriented nature of its economy, and [the survival of the Communist regime](#) ^[3] remains the top priority. Party leader Nguyen Phu Trong emphasised in his closing speech at the 10th Plenum of the 11th Party Central Committee in Hanoi that political reform must not change the political regime. While Vietnam agreed to cooperate with the United States on human rights issues under their partnership, it is difficult to imagine that Hanoi will agree to discuss changing aspects of its political regime. All this points to a continuation of the diplomatic strategy of multipower engagement.

Clearly, the pursuit of this diplomacy presents the country with challenges. Vietnam has no allies or real friends who will come to its aid if it gets [mixed up in a military conflict](#) ^[4]. The alliance that Japan and the Philippines have with the United States includes assisting in matters of defence, but Vietnam does not have such an alliance with any great power in the world. The absence of this kind of alliance can also lead to the risk of falling victim to great-power games (as once happened to Vietnam during the Cold War).

Given all the above — and the hard-learned lessons from Vietnam's relations with the great powers during the last century — Hanoi's dance with the major powers is set to continue.

Min Van Pham is lecturer of International Studies at Vietnam National University in Hanoi. The views contained in this article are the author's alone.

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