

Upholding State Sovereignty Through Global Integration

The Remaking of Vietnamese National Security Policy

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Changing World Views

For forty years after the founding of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam on 2nd September 1945, the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) and its leaders adopted a worldview that was consonant with prevailing Marxist-Leninist ideological strictures (Thayer 1977, 1978, 1981 and 1986b). Global politics was both shaped and determined by the antagonistic contradictions between socialism and capitalism, or more prosaically, between friends and enemies (*dich va ta*). International relations between these two worlds was a struggle of 'who will triumph over whom' (*ai thang ai*). On the domestic front, Marxist-Leninist ideology dictated state control over the means of production and an economic development strategy aimed at industrialization through central planning.

Throughout the period 1945-85 Vietnam viewed itself as the out post of socialism on the front line in the struggle between socialism and colonialism/imperialism. Vietnamese leaders felt that the socialist world owed Vietnam not only solidarity but material support. The emergence of the Sino-Soviet dispute posed difficulties for Vietnam. And for a brief time in the 1960s, Vietnam tilted towards China. Khrushchev's policy of peaceful co-existence was viewed as revisionist.

The onset of the Vietnam War brought greater balance to Vietnam's external relations. Khrushchev's successors quickly supplied the necessary military assistance to enable Vietnam to defend itself against the US air war. By the late 1960s, Vietnamese leaders embraced the Soviet ideological formulation 'three revolutionary currents' as the framework to view international relations (Thayer 1984). The first current was the socialist world led by the Soviet Union. The second current comprised the movements for national liberation in the Third World, while the third current referred to the workers in advanced industrial countries.

In 1978, following the unification of Vietnam, Vietnam's leaders fully committed themselves to the socialist bloc headed by the USSR. In mid-year Vietnam joined the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) and in November, Hanoi and Moscow signed a twenty-five year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. Henceforth the Soviet Union was considered the corner-stone of Vietnam's defence and national security policies. Vietnam also became entirely dependent on the Soviet Union for 'big ticket' military items, development assistance, and trade (Thakur and Thayer 1992 and 1993). In

late 1978 Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia and precipitated a border war with China. Vietnam conceded basing rights to Soviet military forces at Cam Ranh Bay (Storey and Thayer 2001a and 2001b). China was viewed as 'great Han chauvinist power' with hegemonic ambitions.

This paper seeks to explain the dramatic changes in Vietnam's national security policy that began to take shape in the early to mid-1980s, that is, before the end of the Cold War.¹ National security is defined broadly to include foreign and defence policy (on national security see: Thayer 1995a:19-31). At least two major factors influenced these developments. The first was the grave socio-economic crisis that confronted Vietnam. The second factor was external and arose from the 'new political thinking' emanating from the Soviet Union under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev (Thakur and Thayer, eds., 1987).

Due to the confluence of these domestic and external factors Vietnam turned from a foreign policy structured by ideological considerations to a foreign policy framework that placed greater emphasis on national interest and pragmatic diplomacy. Vietnamese analysts now stressed global economic forces and the impact of the revolution in science and technology as key determinants of global order (Nguyen Manh Cam, 1995:223-230 and Vu Khoan, 1995:71-76). Vietnam's changed worldview emerged gradually as the by-product of changed strategic circumstances and intense internal party debate. The ideological framework of the past was not jettisoned entirely.

This paper traces the evolution of Vietnam's new worldview by analyzing major policy documents and identifying key turning points. In summary, Vietnam's 'two world theory' gave way to a view of an interdependent world (Palmujoki 1997, 1999 and 2007). Fears of dependency and assimilation (*hoa nhap*) gave way to a positive view of economic integration (*hoi nhap*) which offered opportunities as well as challenges. Vietnam's new worldview embraced comprehensive security over the much narrower military or defence security. Nonetheless, a residue of the old worldview may be found in the continual reference to the 'threat of peaceful evolution (*dien bien hoa binh*)' (Thayer 1999).

'New Thinking' – Politburo Resolution No. 32

During 1985 Vietnam's economy deteriorated to such an extent that Vietnam faced a major crisis. At the same time, the Soviet Union became increasingly critical of Vietnam's misuse of its aid (Thayer 1991). In a June meeting in

¹Signs of this transformation may be found as early as 1982 at the time of the 5th national party congress; Thayer 1992s and Tran Do, 'Dai Hoi Nam', *Hoi Ky*, vol. 2, chapter 2. Consult http://ykien.net/bntd_hoiky21.html.

Moscow between Mikhail Gorbachev, the new General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), and Vietnamese party chief Le Duan, Vietnam was told to put its economic house in order, make more effective use of Soviet assistance and adhere to schedules written into cooperation agreements (Thakur and Thayer 1993:197). Under pressure Le Duan agreed to mesh Vietnam's five-year economic planning cycle with that of the USSR and to promote specialised production for export.

Vietnam's dire economic straits provoked a renewal of debate within the VCP over the merits of pragmatism versus ideology. Politburo member Vo Van Kiet emerged as the champion of decentralisation and greater flexibility in the planning process, while Minister of the Interior Pham Hung argued for the primacy of party control over the economy and the maintenance of political stability.

The debate in Vietnam was fuelled in part by developments in the Soviet Union where Gorbachev pushed for *perestroika* and *glasnost* – a restructuring of the economy and more openness in the Soviet system. In particular, Vietnam's reformers urged the party to follow the CPSU's example and remove from office those cadres at middle and lower levels who obstructed the reform process. There were muted calls for leadership change at higher levels.² But as political instability grew in the Soviet Union many Vietnamese leaders had second thoughts.

In May-June 1986, the VCP Central Committee held a marathon three-week session, the tenth plenum. Prior to the plenum strong pressure had been brought to bear on Le Duan to step aside and shoulder responsibility for Vietnam's economic mess.³ He refused to do so and by way of compromise it was agreed that Le Duan would continue as Secretary General in a titular role and responsibility for party affairs would be passed to a triumvirate composed of Truong Chinh, Pham Van Dong and Le Duc Tho. No official announcement of this decision was made.⁴

Following the tenth plenum, on 9th July 1986, the Politburo adopted Resolution No. 32 (32/BCT21) on new opportunities and possibilities to consolidate and develop the economy. Significantly, this resolution identified

²In early 1986 the aging party Secretary General Le Duan fell ill and was flown to Moscow for medical treatment. He did not return to Vietnam for three months, He passed away in July. Le Duan had been party leader since 1960.

³For a defence of Le Duan's stewardship as party first secretary see: Tran Quynh, *Nhung Ky Niem ve La Duan, Hoi Ky cua Tran Quynh*, <http://www.lmvntd.org/dossier,tquynh/htm>.

⁴The tenth plenum did make public a number of other leadership changes. Nguyen Van Linh was reappointed to the Secretariat as a senior member. After the plenum, To Huu lost his position as deputy premier and eight government ministers were retired from their portfolios.

'peace and development' as the highest priority and laid the basis for 'new thinking' in the conceptualisation of Vietnam's national security policy. According to a later account, Resolution 32

clearly set out guidelines and revised diplomatic policies, and moved toward a solution in Cambodia. The Resolution clearly stated:

-the external mission of Vietnam is to have good coordination between the strength of the people and the strength of the era, to take advantage of favourable international conditions to build socialism and defend the Fatherland, proactively create a condition for stability and economic construction.

-It is necessary to move proactively to a new stage of development, and peaceful coexistence with China, ASEAN [Association of South East Asian Nations], and the United States, and build Southeast Asia into a region of peace, stability and cooperation (Phan Doan Nam 2006:26).

According to one informant, 'the spirit of the resolution was adopted by the sixth congress'. While this may be true, many in the VCP continued to view the world divided into friends and enemies. According to Interior Minister Pham Hung, in the first stage of the period of transition to socialism, the struggle to defeat the multi-faceted war of sabotage waged by hegemonists in collusion with imperialism is closely linked to the struggle between socialism and capitalism to determine 'who will triumph over whom'.

In December 1986, Vietnam adopted a bold new policy of renovation or *doi moi* at the sixth national party congress (Thayer 1987b). The sixth congress was mainly concerned with overcoming the crisis in the domestic economy. Immediate priority was given to increasing food and grain production, consumer goods and exports. Secretary General Truong Chinh delivered a summary of the Central Committee's Political Report. He identified the means to achieve these priorities: to rearrange the structure of production and to make major readjustments in investment outlay; to build and consolidate the socialist relations of production, and to utilise and transform the various economic sectors in a correct way; to renovate the economic management mechanism; to bring into full play the driving force of science and technology; *and to expand and heighten the effectiveness of external economic relations* (emphasis added).

Two important points should be noted. First, the policy of *doi moi* led to the abandonment of one of the central planks of Marxist-Leninist development ideology – central planning. Second, in order to overcome its economic crisis, Vietnam would have to open itself to foreign investment from non-socialist

countries. In order to achieve this objective Vietnam first had to liquidate the Cambodian problem (Thayer 1987a and 1989a).⁵

Strategic Readjustment

In 1990, in a speech to an all-army political-military conference, VCP Secretary-General Nguyen Van Linh revealed that

Political Bureau has issued its Resolution No. 2 on national defence work, correctly evaluating the enemy and friendly situations and more thoroughly disseminating the concepts of people's war, of all-people's national defence, and of the building of the people's armed forces. On that basis, the Political Bureau has decided on a readjustment of the strategy for national defence (Voice of Vietnam, 27 December 1990).

Politburo Resolution No. 2 was in fact adopted three years earlier but was kept secret (Thayer 1994d:14-17). It was not until 1989 that Vietnam's press began to provide fleeting details of its content. Resolution No. 2 was probably entitled, 'On Strengthening National Defence in the New Revolutionary Stage' (editorial, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, July 6, 1989) and was adopted between April and June (Senior Lt. General Dang Vu Hiep, *Tap Chi Quoc Phong Toan Dan*, July 1989).⁶

One of the first press reports to mention Resolution No. 2 stated it was aimed at 'achieving close coordination and intimate attachment between the economy and national defence' (Bui Dinh Nguyen, *Nhan Dan*, April 10, 1989). Based on other media references it is possible to discern the main outlines of Vietnam's new national security policy. Politburo Resolution No. 2 mandated the return home of all Vietnamese forces in Cambodia and Laos and a major program of demobilization (Thayer 1995c). A domestic radio report on the fifth all-army party organization congress in 1991 noted that:

The delegates agreed that in the last five years, the party echelons in the Armed Forces have actively implemented the military duties of Resolution 2 of the party Political Bureau and resolutions of the Central Military Party Committee. They brought back home the entire force which had been on international duty in a friendly country, adjusted the force according to defence strategy, and cut back more than 600,000 soldiers (Hanoi Domestic Service, April 26, 1991).

⁵The period of struggle aimed at a total victory of the Cambodian revolution, under the illusion that the "situation is irreversible," had come to an end, and we had to acknowledge the reality of a step by step struggle to achieve a political solution for the Cambodian question'; see: Tran Quang Co, *Hoi Ky Tran Quang Co*. <http://www.ykien.net/tqc01.html>.

⁶In September 1987 Nguyen Van Linh addressed a conference of high-level military cadres. In the course of his presentation, Linh mentioned an important "Politburo resolution on national defence tasks in the present period" (*Nghi quyêt của Bộ chính trị về nhiệm vụ quốc phòng trong giai đoạn hiện nay*). The speech was only published three years later: Nguyen Van Linh, *May Van De Quan Su Va Quoc Phong Trong Su Nghiep Doi Moi* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1990), pp. 7-21.

Resolution No. 2 also necessitated the enunciation of a new strategic doctrine — ‘people’s war and all-people’s national defence’ — which redefined the roles of main, reserve, local and militia and self-defence forces, and placed responsibility for building defence zones on the localities. The new doctrine also spelled out new roles for the military in economic activities, new responsibilities for the national defence industry and the development of a new national defence curriculum.

How were these changes to be funded? Defence Minister and Politburo member Le Duc Anh, speaking to a plenary meeting of the sixth session of the eighth National Assembly, revealed that Resolution No. 2 had fixed defence expenditures as a set ratio of the national budget for the three-year period 1987–90:

In 1987, the Political Bureau issued a resolution on the national defence and army question, including the issues of reductions in troop strength and fixing the ratio of the defence budget to the state’s total expenditures through 1990, to enhance the provision of technical support for the army, to improve soldiers’ living conditions and to help stabilize the national economic situation (Hanoi Home Service, December 26, 1989).

As late as 1992, military writers were still underlining the seminal importance of this resolution (Lt. Gen. Nguyen Quoc Thuoc, *Tap Chi Quoc Phong Toan Dan*, May 1992). As noted, Vietnam set itself on the course of withdrawing all combat forces from Laos and Cambodia and undertaking the massive demobilization of its regular army (Thayer 2000). By withdrawing its armed forces from Cambodia, Vietnam set the scene for a negotiated end to a decade-long conflict that had been costly in blood and treasure and which had left Vietnam diplomatically isolated and dependent on the Soviet Union. By demobilizing large numbers of its main force regulars, Vietnam would reduce recurrent costs. Vietnam’s strategic readjustment resulted in depreciating the relative salience of military power as a contributor to national security, and this led in turn to expanding the concept of security to embrace economic power.

The National Interest

On 20th May 1988, Vietnamese party leaders agreed on a new codification of foreign policy objectives that gave priority to economic development (Thayer 1990b:403) and used the term national interest (*loi ich dan toc*) for the first time. This took the form of Politburo Resolution No. 13 (On the External Mission and Policy in the New Situation) which called for a ‘multi-directional foreign policy’ orientation (Porter 1990; Chu Van Chuc 2004:4-7; Luu Doan Huynh 2004; Nguyen Dy Nien 2005: 30; Phan Doan Nam 2006: 26-30). The new emphasis was ‘to maintain peace, take advantage of favorable world conditions’ in order to stabilize the domestic situation and set the base for

economic development over the next ten to fifteen years.

In other words, this resolution marked the beginning of a shift away from the 'two worlds' view towards the concept of an interdependent world. Vietnam was now poised to shift from confrontation to accommodation in its foreign policy. According to one party official, Resolution 13 directed that a 'comprehensive and long-term regional policy towards Asia and Southeast Asia; be drawn up 'as soon as possible' (Nguyen Huu Cat 1996:28-29). Resolution No. 13 is now recognized as a major landmark in Vietnam's external relations.

At the end of 1988 Mikhail Gorbachev put paid to the concept of the 'two worlds' in a major address to the United Nations General Assembly. Gorbachev stressed that the development of any one country would be based 'on the interests of all mankind'. He spoke of the 'emergence of a mutually connected and integral world' and that future progress would only be possible 'through the search for a consensus of all mankind, in movement toward a new world order'. Once again, influences from the Soviet Union impacted on Vietnam (Thayer 1992c).

In September 1989 Vietnam unilaterally withdrew its armed forces from Cambodia. Over the next five years Vietnam demobilized 700,000 troops, reducing main force strength from 1.2 million in 1987 to 500,000. In October 1991, Vietnam was a signatory to the comprehensive political settlement that brought an end to the Cambodian conflict. Vietnam was no longer an international pariah state subject to an aid and trade boycott. In sum, the settlement of the Cambodian conflict set the stage for the transformation of regional relations from confrontation between two blocs to accommodation among the states of Southeast Asia Thayer 1988 and 1990a).

In 1989 socialism collapsed in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union began to disintegrate. Vietnamese leaders reacted by developing a new concept of security which gave greater emphasis to economic development as a contributor to national security. In March 1989, for example, the party Central Committee's sixth plenum adopted a resolution that 'clearly pointed out the need to strongly shift the focus in foreign policy from political relations to political-economic relations' (Nguyen Dy Nien 2005: 31).

By the end of 1989 it was clear that a re-conceptualisation of old ways of thinking about national security was well underway. Party Secretary General Nguyen Van Linh (1989), for example, wrote that:

You cannot protect the Fatherland without a strong military. But political, economic and diplomatic factors also play a key role in the mission of defending the country. We must organize and mobilize each facet: struggle and construction, politics and economics, creating a comprehensive strength to defend the Fatherland, just as we knew how to develop comprehensive strength to defeat the enemy during the war

Premier Do Muoi further elaborated on this new formulation in a major speech marking the anniversary of the Vietnam People's Army in December:

We must recognize that today security and development have a very close connection to each other, and a reciprocal impact. In an age of the scientific and technological revolution, and in an era of a high level of globalization of the international economy, the independence and security of a country must rest on a sufficient military strength, and a strong political-economic foundation, along with broad international cooperative relationships, at the same time creating interlocking ties and interdependence of interests. Weakness in the economy and defence and political instability are great dangers to the independence and security of the country. With a comprehensive strength that rests on the foundation of a strong economy, a firm and stable political regime, and a sufficient military establishment, along with broadening cooperative international relations, we have a greater chance of preserving peace, independence, and successfully building socialism (Do Muoi 1989).

Peaceful Evolution

In 1990, Vietnam's leaders debated the causes of the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the lessons for Vietnam.⁷ Clearly the 'threat of peaceful evolution' was elevated as one of the major threats to Vietnamese national security. But Vietnam's leadership was divided on this question. Others felt that failing to develop economically would result in Vietnam's falling behind other states. The debate soon turned to the relative importance of ideology and national interest, assimilation versus integration, and diversifying relations versus seeking strategic allies (*Hoi Ky Tran Quang Co*).

The debate was not just theoretical because it touched on future relations with China (Thayer 1992b, 1994a and 1994b). Was China an expansionist hegemonic power or was it socialist and therefore a potential ally? According to Tran Quang Co, a former deputy foreign minister, some party members asked why several regional states were worried about China while Vietnam was trying to woo China as a strategic ally. More fundamentally, some party members asked 'what is the main threat to our security and development at

⁷Vietnam's defence ministry's directorate of military intelligence (General Directorate II) translated and published Chinese texts on peaceful evolution as well as book swritten by Vietnamese authors. See: *Dien Bien Hoa Binh va Chong Dien Bien Hoa Binh* (original in Chinese), and Luong Van Dong et al., translator, *Chien Luoc Dien Bien Hoa Binh Cua My* (original in Chinese) both translated and published by Tong Cuc II, Bo Quoc Phong, 1993; General Nguyen Anh Lan, chief editor, *Chien Luoc Dien Bien Hoa Binh cua De Quoc My va Cac The Luc Phan Dong Quoc Te Chong Chu Nghia Xa Hoi va Chong Viet Nam Xa Hoi Chu Nghia*, (Hanoi: Tong Cuc II, Bo Quoc Phong, 1993); and Luu Dinh A, general editor, *Cuoc Chien Tranh The Gioi Kong Co Khoi Sung* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia – Tong cuc II, Bo Quoc Phong, 1994). For an overview of Vietnam's intelligence community see Thayer 2008.

present? Is it the threat of falling behind economically or is it peaceful evolution? (*Hoi Ky Tran Quang Co*)⁸

The threat of falling behind economically was an urgent matter as the disintegration of the Soviet Union impacted on Vietnam. In 1990 Vietnam was told by its Soviet benefactors that the 'free ride' was over (Thayer 1995b). In mid-year, Moscow informed Hanoi it would be forced to reduce its economic aid program the following year and that trade would have to be balanced and conducted in hard currency at world market rates. The Soviet Union then cut its shipments of fertiliser, cotton, oil products and steel.

As a result Vietnam experienced a 63 per cent drop in aid receipts during the first half of the year and the cancellation of a number of contracts to buy Vietnamese goods (remarks by Vo Van Kiet made in August 1990). According to the IMF, Vietnam's exports to capitalist countries rose 73% in 1990 and 1991, while its imports doubled (Thayer 1992d: 25). Vietnam's reorientation towards trade with East Asia was a remarkable break from its dependency on the USSR and COMECON.

At year's end Nguyen Van Linh told an all-army political-military conference 'we shall no longer enjoy international subsidies' (Voice of Vietnam, December 27, 1990). The disintegration of the Soviet Union meant that Vietnam lost not only its ideological patron but the main source of foreign aid and trade. Vietnam had little choice but rethink its economic reform package (*doi moi*) and reorient its economy by developing new commercial ties with neighbouring East Asian states. Signs of a reappraisal emerged in August 1990 at the VCP Central Committee's tenth plenum which considered a new party political platform (the first in sixty years) and a fresh economic blueprint embodied in two major policy documents, a draft program for socialist construction in the transitional period and a draft strategy for socio-economic development until the year 2000 (communiqué, Voice of Vietnam, 29 August 1990). These documents were released to the public in December for discussion and amended versions were presented to the seventh party congress scheduled for 1991.

'Friends with all Countries'

The next important elaboration of Vietnam's 'multi-directional foreign policy' occurred at the seventh national party congress (Vu Khoan 1995:75 and Thayer 1993:221)). The congress was held in Hanoi from 24th to 27th June 1991.⁹ Congress delegates considered five separate reports, a record number.

⁸Some Vietnamese leaders sought to sound out China on a 'red solution' to the Cambodian problem. The idea of an alliance with China was also mooted Thayer 1992b and 1994a).

⁹Note Nguyen Nam Khanh's account of the so-called 'Sau Su Affair' prior to the seventh congress. This was a power struggle with a faction led by Vo Nguyen Giap gaining favor over

These included the all-important Political Report of the Central Committee (sixth congress); the *Report on Party-Building and Amendment of Party Statutes; Party Statutes (Revised), Strategy for Socio-Economic Stabilisation and Development Up To The Year 2000*; and *Platform for National Construction in the Period of Transition to Socialism*.

The final version of the *Platform for National Construction in the Period of Transition to Socialism*, chapter two, took note of the 'grave crisis' in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. It asserted that 'the contradictions between socialism and capitalism are unfolding fiercely' but that 'mankind will certainly advance to socialism, for this is the law of evolution of history' (Communist Party of Vietnam 1991: 49-50). For its part, Vietnam would bypass the capitalist stage and embark on a prolonged transition to socialism 'involving many stages' of which the present was just the 'initial stage'.

Chapter three set out the major directions for 'socio-economic, national defence and security, and foreign policies' (Communist Party of Vietnam 1991:54). The object of socio-economic development was to create 'a socialist-orientated mixed commodity economy' in which the state would play the 'leading role', the collective sector would 'constantly expand' and the private sector would 'retain a fairly large presence'. In the national defence and security section emphasis was placed on gradually building up the national defence industry and modernizing the armed forces. Finally, in the foreign policy section, the platform argued that the main objective was 'to create favourable international conditions for... the advance to socialism' (Communist Party of Vietnam 1991:61).

The seventh congress adopted an important modification to Politburo Resolution No. 13 (1988). As key foreign policy documents made clear, Vietnam would 'diversify (*da dang*) and multilateralise (*da phuong*) economic relations with all countries and economic organizations...' In short, 'Vietnam wants to become the friend of all countries in the world community, and struggle for peace, independence and development'. According to the Political Report, 'We stand for equal and mutually beneficial co-operation with all countries regardless of different socio-political systems and on the basis of the principle of peaceful co-existence' (Communist Party of Vietnam 1991, 134).

The Political Report, reflecting the confusion caused by the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe, gave priority to relations with the Soviet Union,

the orthodox line. A branch of military intelligence, known as Tong Cuc II recorded fabricated testimonies by an agent named 'Sau Su' slandering Giap, Tran Van Tra and others in this group. The Politburo, party Secretary General and Central Committee reportedly were deceived by this 'black operation' according to Khanh (Letter of 17 June 2004).

Laos, Cambodia, China, Cuba, other 'communist and workers' parties', the 'forces struggling for peace, national independence, democracy and social progress', India, and the Non-Aligned Movement. It was only at the end of this list that Vietnam's 'new friends' were mentioned:

To develop relations of friendship with other countries in South-East Asia and the Asia-Pacific region, and to strive for a South-East Asia of peace, friendship and co-operation. To expand equal and mutually beneficial co-operation with northern and Western European countries, Japan and other developed countries. To promote the process of normalization of relations with the United States (Communist Party of Vietnam 1991:135).

The Central Committee held its second plenary session in late 1991 (25th November-4th December). This plenum listed five major issues that needed to be resolved in 1992 including Vietnam's external relations in light of the collapse of the Soviet Union in August and the signing of the Cambodian peace agreement in October. Party members expressed legitimate concerns about the fate of ethnic Vietnamese residents in Cambodia and the potential for border clashes. But of concern to the Central Committee was an emerging revisionist critique of Vietnam's decade-long involvement. Some party members wanted to know what Vietnam had gained after expending so much blood and treasure there (author's interviews in Vietnam in November 1991). Others—members of the army and the general public—termed Vietnam's involvement a mistake. According to one diplomat, '[a]fter Vietnam's historic victory in Cambodia, which cost Vietnam international prestige and destroyed its relations with China, many people are asking how the party could make such a serious mistake'.

The collapse of the Soviet Union rendered outdated Vietnam's first foreign policy priority — 'to consistently strengthen solidarity and co-operation with the Soviet Union, to renew the mode and improve the efficiency of Vietnamese-Soviet co-operation in order to meet the interests of each country' (Communist Party of Vietnam 1991:134). Likewise, Vietnam's hopes of maintaining 'special relations of solidarity' with the 'fraternal peoples of Cambodia' had been overtaken by events in that country. In September 1989 the Cambodian People's Revolutionary Party had renamed itself the Cambodian People's Party and discarded Marxism-Leninism. The draft agreement on a comprehensive international peace settlement required that Cambodia become a liberal democracy and adopt a 'neutral and non-aligned foreign policy', a formulation which required the termination of Cambodia's 1979 treaty of friendship and cooperation with Vietnam.

Since the seventh party congress, Vietnam succeeded in diversifying its foreign relations by moving from dependency on the Soviet Union to a more diverse and balanced set of external relations. Five developments are particularly notable: normalization of relations with all members of ASEAN

(Thayer 1996b, 1997c, 1992d:55-62)), normalization of relations with China (November 1991), Vietnam's accession to the 1976 ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation¹⁰, the restoration of official development assistance by Japan (November 1992), and establishment of diplomatic relations with South Korea (December 1992). In 1989, Vietnam had diplomatic relations with only twenty-three non-communist states by 1995 this number had expanded to 163 countries.

Is China Socialist?

Vietnam reaped substantial foreign policy dividends following the Cambodian peace agreements. All was not smooth sailing, however. In February, 1992, China's National People's Congress passed a law on territorial waters which claimed all islands in the South China Sea. This brought China and Vietnam into direct conflict, especially over features in the Spratly Island archipelago. In May, China negotiated a contract with Crestone Energy Corporation, an American firm, to explore for oil off Vietnam's eastern coast. Vietnam claimed the concession was on its continental shelf and sent a protest note to Beijing. China responded by suggesting that technical talks be held but escalated tensions by landing troops on an uninhabited reef in the Spratly archipelago (Thayer 1996a).

Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea posed the fundamental question of how to manage the process of opening up without incurring unpalatable negative consequences. China's actions became the focus of discussions at the third plenary meeting of the VCP Central Committee that met from 18th-29th June 1992. There were two main items on the agenda, 'renewal and readjustment of the party' and external relations. China's recent assertiveness guaranteed that it was the subject of particular concern. According to one political analyst the third plenum was set against the more general background of an 'ideological and organisational crisis in the VCP following the collapse of communism in the Soviet bloc and Vietnam's move to a market economy'.

Party Secretary General Do Muoi, in his address to the plenum, generally presented an upbeat assessment of Vietnam's external relations. He noted 'during the past year, our party and state have actively and positively expanded foreign affairs activities while strongly opposing the policy of economic blockade and isolation against Vietnam' (Voice of Vietnam, July 7, 1992). One confidential source revealed that the questions of what constituted

¹⁰In July 1992, Vietnam attended a meeting of ASEAN Ministerial Meeting as an observer for the first time. By signing the ASEAN TAC Vietnam renounced the use of force or the threat to use force in foreign relations and committed itself to the non-violent resolution of any conflict that might arise.

Vietnam's national interest (*loi ich dan toc*) and whether or not proletarian internationalism contributed to the national interest were discussed.

Foreign media reports noted that party members debated whether or not China constituted a long-term threat to Vietnam's security. They were divided over whether to classify China as expansionist or not. According to one insider, 'Older party officials argued that China has continued on the road to socialism, so we should make allies with the Chinese and ignore small conflicts. But younger leaders said China has adopted a two-faced policy toward Vietnam and is using socialism as a rope to tie Vietnam's hands' (quoted in Hiebert 1992:20).

The final communiqué endorsed continued efforts to broaden Vietnam's external relations: 'foreign relations hold a very important position in the cause of building socialism' and '[w]ith our open foreign policy, we declare that Vietnam wants to befriend all nations in the world community...' But there was no direct mention of China in the plenum's published proceedings (for Vietnamese perceptions of 'the China threat' see Thayer 2002b).

Four Dangers

At the seventh congress, the VCP statutes were amended to include a provision for a mid-term party conference (*hoi nghi dai bieu toan quoc giua nhieu ky*) to review party policy and leadership performance at the half-way point between national congresses. The mid-term conference was originally scheduled for November 1993 but due to disagreement *inter alia* over the wording of the Political Report it was postponed to December, and then to January 1994. In the meantime, senior members of the Politburo travelled extensively across the country to elicit feedback and to build up support. Vo Van Kiet was particularly active in attending regional meetings.

Politburo members found that party members were divided on over the consequences of Vietnam's open door foreign policy. Military and security officials argued that opening up the economy had already exposed Vietnam to such negative consequences as corruption, smuggling, prostitution and drug addiction and that these social vices would only get worse. Further, they argued, Vietnam would also be exposed to the dangers of peaceful evolution and political instability. In 1993, for example, the Vietnam People's Army's Military Intelligence Branch translated and published a 1991 Chinese text on peaceful evolution. The introduction to the Vietnamese edition stated, 'From the birth of socialism, the consistent strategic goal of imperialism has been to destroy socialism. In order to realise this goal, opposition forces have not neglected any of the most poisonous schemes, among which is "peaceful

evolution".¹¹ Supporters of economic reforms sought to fund Vietnam's socio-economic development plans by attracting foreign investment and development assistance. Many felt that normalizing relations with the United States was key to Vietnam's overall reform strategy.

The Central Committee held its sixth plenum from 24th November–1st December 1993 to prepare the agenda for the mid-term conference and to discuss last minute changes to the draft Political Report in light of comments received. Do Muoi tabled a copy of the draft Political Report which had just been endorsed by the Politburo and in his address sought to clarify certain 'major issues' (*Voice of Vietnam*, December 4, 1993). Most of the issues which Do Muoi discussed had been rehearsed at previous meetings of the Central Committee. For example, he stressed the need to restructure the economy so Vietnam could move in the direction of 'industrialisation and modernisation' and the importance of 'multilateralization and diversification' in foreign relations. He also noted the importance of attracting foreign capital and modern technology.

According to the final communiqué, the plenum held 'animated debates on the draft political report' (*Nhan Dan*, December 4, 1993). The Politburo was entrusted with 'perfecting' the draft in light of the consensus reached at the plenum.¹² On 17th-18th January, in a 'continuation of the work of sixth plenum', the Central Committee convened a brief session to complete preparations for the mid-term conference (*Nhan Dan*, January 20, 1994).

The VCP convened its first mid-term party conference in Hanoi from 20th-25th January 1994 with the participation of 647 delegates.¹³ The conference was concerned mainly with two major items, approving the Political Report and personnel changes. The conference also considered a report prepared by representatives the foreign affairs, national defence and interior on the party's response to the threat of peaceful evolution. Do Muoi delivered the Political Report on behalf of the Central Committee (*Nhan Dan*, January 21, 1994). He highlighted as positive developments: economic progress, political renovation and the maintenance of political stability, and success in diplomatic activities. In part two of his Political Report, Do Muoi listed eight essential tasks to be

¹¹Nguyen Huy Quy, et al., translators, *Ban Ve Van De Chong Dien Bien Hoa Binh* Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 1993, 9.

¹²The plenum also considered letters from six members of the Central Committee offering their resignations but approved only four including Tran Quang Co, deputy foreign minister.

¹³In addition to representatives from province and bloc-level party committees, the conference was attended by all members of the Central Committee, three current Central Committee advisers, ten former Politburo members and representatives from Central Committee departments.

carried out including maintain national defence and security and continue to expand external relations.

In sum, the Political Report reaffirmed Vietnam's commitment to the broad outlines of economic and political renovation which had emerged since the seventh congress. The report warned about the threat of peaceful evolution aimed at 'abolishing the party and socialist regime'. In the face of this assessment, the Political Report reaffirmed Vietnam's commitment to 'building a socialist orientated market mechanism under state management' and opposition to political pluralism or any other challenges to socialism. Indeed, prior to the conference delegates were given a required reading list that contained four works dealing with the threat of peaceful evolution. One of the books was a translation of a Chinese account justifying the suppression of pro-democracy demonstrators in Beijing in 1989.

The major policy theme to emerge from the mid-term conference was the priority to be given industrialization and modernization. In order to industrialize and modernize the Political Report underscored the crucial importance of mobilizing domestic and foreign capital. Vietnam had successfully re-orientated its trade after the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Foreign investment was up. According to the Political Report '[b]y the end of 1993, some 836 foreign investment projects had been licensed, with a registered capital of [US] 7.5bn dollars'. The shift of the economic structure to support industrialization had been mentioned first in the *Strategy of Socio-Economic Stabilisation and Development Up Until the Year 2000* adopted by the seventh congress. The stress on industrialization and modernization had been endorsed by the Central Committee's third plenum in June 1993. Now it was given higher status by its endorsement by the mid-term conference.

After the conference the official Vietnamese media highlighted what it termed the challenges of 'four dangers' facing Vietnam: the danger of being left behind (*tut hau*) economically by regional countries; danger of peaceful evolution against socialism; danger of corruption; and danger of the breakdown of social order and security (Voice of Vietnam, January 22, 1994).

In the period between the 1994 mid-term conference and the convening of the eighth national party congress in mid-1996 Vietnam continued to pursue an open door foreign policy designed 'to make friends with all countries' in an effort to diversify and multilateralise its external relations. These efforts paid handsome dividends. Vietnam continued to attract increased direct foreign investment mainly in the form of joint ventures.

In 1993-94 the United States ended its long-standing objections to the provision of developmental assistance to Vietnam by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and gradually lifted restrictions on trade and

investment with Vietnam. Vietnam thus became eligible for a variety of aid, credits and commercial loans to finance its development plans.

In July 1995 Vietnam made a major break through on the foreign policy front; it normalised relations with the United States, became ASEAN's seventh member, and signed a framework cooperation agreement with the European Union. For the first time, Vietnam had diplomatic relations with all five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and, equally importantly, with the world's three major economic centres: Europe, North America and East Asia.

New Fears of 'Peaceful Evolution'

In 1995-96 discord between 'reformers' and 'conservatives' resulted in a rift in the Vietnam Communist Party as each grouping sought to shape the policy deliberations and personnel changes in advance of the eighth party congress. Party conservatives were worried that one-party rule would be undermined by the negative consequences of economic growth and that national independence would be lost as Vietnam was integrated into the world economy. They drew attention not only to rising levels of corruption by party and state officials, but the increase of so-called 'social vices' such as prostitution, gambling, and drug addiction. Conservatives also argued that Vietnam still faced the threat of peaceful evolution (Thayer 1999). On the eve of the eighth party congress a leading exponent of conservative orthodoxy was expelled from the Politburo. Infighting between the reformers and conservatives became so intense that a planned leadership transition was postponed in the interests of party unity and political stability.

After the 1994 mid-term conference a Central Committee sub-committee was set up to 'amend and rectify' a report on 'further stepping up the process of national industrialisation and modernisation'. This report was tabled at the seventh plenum held in Hanoi from 25th-30th July 1994. Do Muoi, in his opening address to the plenary session, raised three major issues. Firstly, he emphasized the importance of linking industrialisation with advances in technology. 'This time there is something new', Do Muoi said, 'that is, the question of linking industrialisation and modernisation with the widespread application of those advanced scientific and technological findings of our era'. Secondly, Do Muoi repeatedly stressed the importance of industrialisation to the development of a national defence industry. In his view, this was a reciprocal relationship. Thirdly, Do Muoi strongly defended Vietnam's open door policy but at the same time expressed misgivings that foreign development assistance and investment would undermine the country's independence. He said:

Carrying out economic cooperation and joint ventures with foreign countries is not only the key method to attract capital investment from abroad, but it is also

an appropriate measure to achieve technological transfer and gain experience in modern management systems, thereby paving the way for us to enter markets in the region and the world...

Cooperation must be carried out on the basis of firmly maintaining national independence and sovereignty; protecting the interests of the economic, political, cultural and social domains; and maintaining national defence and security (Voice of Vietnam, August 1, 1994).

Do Muoi then warned that dependency on overseas capital could come at the expense of national sovereignty. However much Vietnam needed foreign capital, 'domestic sources of capital are considered decisive... This is an important guiding notion that must be profoundly understood currently and in the long run'.

The resolution of the seventh plenum broke new ground in its extensive discussion of the development of the national defence industry (Thayer 1997a). The resolution declared:

With regard to the national defence industry, we must appropriately invest in the national defence industry through various steps of industrial and technological development in order to help provide equipment to and gradually modernize various combat branches and armed services. In the period ahead, we must strive to be able to manufacture some ordinary weapons and equipment and gradually build military vessels for the Navy and the Border Defence Corps.

We must have appropriate policies and structures if we are to promptly apply scientific and technological findings in the national defence industry.

We must introduce new technologies to improve our capability to maintain, repair, renovate and modernise our existing equipment. We must apply computer science and automation in combat deployment and planning (Voice of Vietnam, August 11, 1994).

Concern about the negative impact of opening Vietnam's economy to foreign investment, trade and development assistance centred on the newly established diplomatic relationship with the United States. In February 1994 President Bill Clinton lifted the economic embargo that the United States had imposed on North Vietnam thirty years earlier and which had been extended to cover all of Vietnam after unification. A US liaison office was opened in Hanoi a year later. In July 1995, when the United States officially recognised the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, President Bill Clinton expressed the hope that his action 'will advance the cause of freedom in Vietnam just as it did in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union'.¹⁴ These developments triggered

¹⁴The establishment of formal diplomatic relations did not result in fully normalised relations. Vietnam did not qualify for most favoured nation (MFN) trading status, Export-Import Bank credits, or insurance cover from the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) unless Vietnam complied with the terms of the Jackson-Vanik amendment requiring free and open emigration (or a presidential waiver subject to annual review by Congress). It was not until

a negative response from party conservatives who felt that 'reactionary external powers' would try to take advantage of Vietnam's opening to play upon internal party disunity and destabilise Vietnam's one-party state. Vietnam's reformers, who pushed for an open door foreign policy and the normalisation of relations with the United States, were constantly challenged by party conservatives who demanded to know what Vietnam would get in return by offering to cooperate with America.

At the beginning of 1995, Do Muoi touched on these concerns in his opening address to the eighth plenum. Do Muoi called for a heightening of vigilance 'against all the wicked schemes and acts by hostile forces'. 'These forces are attempting to sow division within our party and create disunity among our party, state and people to accomplish their dark goal of eliminating our party, regime and revolutionary administration', he asserted (*Voice of Vietnam*, January 25, 1995). One party official summed up Vietnam's dilemma in this way: 'There are two shared points within the party leadership. The first is that we cannot close the door to the outside world. If we do that, we will die. The second point is the recognition that if we try to move forward too quickly, we are more likely to fall down'.

As the eighth national party congress approached the normalisation of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the United States became a contentious issue between those advocating a step up in reforms and external opening and ideological conservatives who feared that America's hidden agenda was no less than the peaceful overthrow of communist party rule.

On 7th August, reformist Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet wrote a twenty-one page classified memorandum for consideration by the Politburo.¹⁵ Kiet began by noting that the end of the Cold War and the collapse of bipolarity had rendered outdated many of the fundamental assumptions of Vietnamese national security policy. Kiet viewed falling behind economically as the major threat to security. In his view, Vietnam was faced not only by challenges but opportunities in its attempt to engage the world.

Kiet touched on four areas: the nature of the international system, the meaning of socialist orientations and socialist deviation, reform of the state administrative system, and party-building (Vo Van Kiet 1996).¹⁶ In his discussion of foreign relations Kiet argued that confrontation between socialism and imperialism had given way to multi-polarity as the dominant feature of the global system. According to Kiet

March 1998 that the President waived the Jackson-Vanik requirements. In addition, Vietnam would have to negotiate a trade agreement that was subject to approval by the US Congress.

¹⁵'Thu cua Ong Vo Van Kiet Gui Bo Chinh Tri Dang Cong San Viet Nam', 1995.

¹⁶Only the foreign policy section of his report is discussed here.

In today's world there is no antagonistic contradiction between socialism and imperialism, but above all there is a quality of diversity and multi-polarity that is becoming the most dominant element that governs interactions between all states in the world. Another thing that is different from before is that today, national interest, regional interest, and other global interests (for example, peace, environment, development, globalisation of manufacturing) plays an increasingly important role in the development of the contradictions as well as the concentration of new forces in today's world. Many other contradictions that existed in the period when the world was divided into two camps – including even the contradiction between imperialism and socialism, may continue to exist, but they will increasingly be governed by other contradictions and because of this will no longer play their old role.

In Kiet's view the four remaining socialist countries—China, Vietnam, North Korea and Cuba (Laos was omitted)—‘cannot act and have no international value as a united economic force’ as each was still searching for a suitable path of development. ‘Speaking of Vietnam's relations with China and the Democratic Republic of Korea’, he wrote, ‘the national interest character overwhelms (if not obliterates) the socialist character of the relationships among these countries’. And, to illustrate his point, Kiet also mentioned ‘hot spots’ which could flare up, a pointed reference to the South China Sea where China occupied islands claimed by Vietnam.

According to Kiet, changes in the international system resulted in greater acceptance of Vietnam's one-party state by the world community. He listed normalisation of diplomatic relations with the United States and membership in ASEAN as two major achievements of his government. In so doing he downplayed the threat posed by the United States to Vietnam. Indeed, he argued for a strengthening of relations with Washington: ‘Vietnam will benefit more if we go down that path’, he wrote. In sum, in Kiet's view, Vietnam now faced the most favourable international environment since 1945 and should take determined steps to take advantage of this situation. In the new strategic context, Vietnam should seek to attain the goal of becoming a “prosperous nation, strong country and a just (egalitarian) and civilised society’.

Kiet's memorandum was circulated at a time when preparations were just getting underway to prepare the draft strategic policy documents to be presented to the eighth party congress scheduled for 1996. Kiet's views triggered a strong reaction by conservative Politburo members Dao Duy Tung and Nguyen Ha Phan. Tung had carriage of ideological matters while Phan was responsible for economic affairs. Tung was being privately tipped as the next party secretary general.

Phan addressed a number of closed meetings of party cadres where, without mentioning Kiet by name, he branded Kiet's views a ‘deviation from socialism’. Vietnam's conservative ideologues also played on deep anxieties about the newly developing relationship with Vietnam's former arch enemy

by highlighting the social evils which accompanied the open door policy and by warning of the threat of peaceful evolution (*Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, September 12, October 21, and December 25, 1995; Bui Phan Ky 1995; Tran Mo 1995; and Nguyen Nam Khanh 1996).

Conservative Backlash

Further internal party tensions erupted in mid-year when middle level party members called for the rehabilitation of a group of former officials who had been imprisoned on charges of revisionism for opposing Vietnam's pro-China anti-Soviet tilt during the 1960s (Quinn-Judge 2005). The critics argued that the so-called 'anti-part revisionists' had been correct in their assessment of China as born out by China's later siding with the Khmer Rouge and China's attack on Vietnam's northern border in early 1979. Party critics argued that if the VCP leadership was not infallible then it could not claim to be so now. This judgment implicitly called into question the basis of authority of the current leadership.

The conservatives responded by supporting a crackdown on these critics. Nguyen Ha Phan led the counter-attack, with the full backing of his mentor, Dao Duy Tung. Party conservatives sought to stamp their ideological views on draft documents being prepared for the eighth congress. Further, conservatives began to push for leadership changes, including the retirement of Vo Van Kiet. In response to Vo Van Kiet's memorandum, on 23rd October party conservatives drafted a ten-page rebuttal entitled, 'American Strategies to Transform Socialist Vietnam After the Normalisation of United States-Vietnam Relations' which they circulated among high-ranking officials along with a leaked copy of Kiet's memo (*Chien Luoc Chuyen Hoa Viet Nam*, 1995).

The conservative rebuttal argued that membership in ASEAN and normalisation of relations with the United States, far from being diplomatic victories, were part of a clever new US strategy of 'selective economic development' to undermine communist party rule by encouraging the development of democratic forces. The conservative document argued, 'America will push not only for economic freedom but also political freedom. America will urge Vietnam to discard communism... [which] will be replaced by foreign investors and capitalist businesses'. The document also warned that US investment was designed to dominate the Vietnamese market and the United States would seek out and support reformist elements in the party.

The conservative ascendancy reached its height at the Central Committee's ninth plenum that met in Hanoi from 6th-14th November 1995. This meeting considered three major draft reports to be considered by the eighth party congress. The influence of the conservatives was revealed in the wording of the final communiqué. Firstly, the communiqué noted that the four dangers

mentioned at the 1994 mid-term conference 'are still there'. These dangers were listed as: lagging behind economically, deviation from the socialist orientation, red tape and corruption, and peaceful evolution (Ha Dang, *Vietnam Economic Times*, December 1995, 11). Secondly, the communiqué warned against losing sight of 'the two strategic tasks of socialist construction and national defence'. Finally, the communiqué noted that agreement had been reached on six main lessons including 'the pursuit of a foreign policy of independence, sovereignty, diversification and multilateralisation [that] has won the sympathy, support and assistance of the world people for our just cause'.

The conservative ascendancy was apparent when the draft eighth congress Political Report was released by the Secretariat for public discussion on 9th April on the eve of the Central Committee's tenth plenum (*Du Thao Bao Cao Chinh Tri...* 1996). The draft was replete with conservative ideological code words and policy prescriptions. This was evident in its opening paragraphs that offered this assessment:

Not long after the Seventh Party Congress the Soviet Union collapsed. This had a profound impact on Vietnam. A majority of our cadres and people were worried. A number of people vacillated over and became skeptical about the future of socialism. Our economic ties with traditional markets were upset. Meanwhile, the US maintained its embargo on us. Certain external forces stepped up their strategy of peaceful evolution and related subversive activities. Some local reactionary elements seized this opportunity to raise their heads.

The theme of the 'threat of peaceful evolution' pervaded the draft report. In the section on national defence and security, the report stated: '[w]e must effectively prevent and crush all plots and activities of peaceful evolution and subversive violence and be ready to deal with any other complicated situations that could arise'. The section that dealt with the 'international situation' was a throw back to the 'two camp thesis' of the Cold War era. It portrayed a dark and pessimistic view in total contrast to the picture presented by Vo Van Kiet in his memo to the Politburo. The draft report argued:

With the collapse of socialism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, socialism in general has suffered a temporary setback. These events do not change the essential characteristics of our times, however. Humanity is still living in the transitional period between capitalism and socialism. Capitalist conflicts continue to exist and develop in new forms, and in some aspects these conflicts are mounting to a considerable extent. National and class struggles continue in various forms. The danger of a destructive world war has been pushed back, but armed conflicts, regional wars, ethnic and religious conflicts, the production and trafficking of weapons, arms races, interventionist and subversive activities, and terrorism still occur in many places.

The document once again reiterated that Vietnam faced four dangers (the risk of falling further behind other countries economically, peaceful evolution

under the guise of democracy and human rights to interfere in our internal affairs, deviations from socialism, together with officialdom and corruption).

Several days after the public release of the draft Political Report, the Central Committee held its tenth plenary session (12th-20th April). This meeting took swift action to prevent further destabilisation of party unity. The plenum endorsed a decree drawn up by the party Secretary General taking disciplinary action against Nguyen Ha Phan. Phan was expelled from the party 'because he had committed a serious mistake in his past activities'. Foreign journalists reported that Phan 'faced other criticisms during the recent party plenum', including 'erroneous economic views' and, more importantly, leaking Vo Van Kiet's August memorandum to the Politburo. Phan's mentor, Dao Duy Tung, was rebuked for attempting to unduly influence the selection of new Central Committee members.

In sum, on the eve of Vietnam's eighth national party congress the VCP was rent by divisions between 'reformers' and 'conservatives' over ideology, the pace and scope of reform efforts, the extent to which Vietnam should open itself to foreign influences, and leadership change. Party conservatives warned that foreign influences would cause Vietnam 'to stray down the capitalist path.' The 'threat of peaceful evolution' was also invoked.

Despite the demise of comrades Phan and Tung, conservative views continued to be expressed at the highest levels. For example, Le Kha Phieu, in an address to the eleventh party organisation congress of the Politico-Military Institute, argued that the international situation was dominated by the confrontation between socialism and imperialism. 'Capitalism will certainly be replaced by [socialism] as it has already become obsolete and unable to meet the people's welfare needs at a time when mankind's economic, scientific, and technological progress has reached a level that can better meet the needs of every individual and every household', he argued (*Nhan Dan*, March 25, 1996). In a speech to the Ho Chi Minh City party congress on 9th May, Muoi asserted that Ho Chi Minh City had become a 'prime ground' for the activities of hostile forces seeking the 'collapse of the revolutionary administration of Vietnam'.

These conservative views stood in marked contrast to those expressed by Vo Van Kiet and his reformist supporters. They favoured encouraging the growth of the private sector, privatisation of state-owned enterprises and reliance on foreign direct investment as a means of accelerating Vietnam's integration into ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific region. It was left to the Central Committee's eleventh plenum, which was held from 3rd-9th June on the eve of the eighth congress, to thrash out the differences between conservatives and reformers over the foreign policy section of the draft Political Report.

Status Quo Upheld

The eighth national congress of party delegates was held in Hanoi from 28th June to 1st July 1996. Thirty-five foreign delegations attended. The communist parties from all socialist states in power (China, Laos, North Korea and Cuba) as well as communist and socialist parties and national liberation movements not in power (from France, Russia, Japan, Belarus, Ukraine, Bulgaria, USA, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Argentina, India (CPI [M] and CPI), Lebanon, Brazil, Greece, Chile) were present. It was significant that representatives from non-communist ruling parties from neighbouring states such as the People's Action Party from Singapore, UMNO from Malaysia and FUNCINPEC from Cambodia were included.

When the final Political Report submitted to the congress is compared with two earlier drafts it is notable that the foreign policy section was the most heavily edited and amended. Quite clearly the views of pragmatic policy practitioners as well as party reformers succeeded in toning down some of the ideological rhetoric in earlier drafts. For example, the opening section of the draft Political Report stated, '[c]ertain external forces stepped up their strategy of peaceful evolution and related subversive activities. Some local reactionary elements seized this opportunity to raise their heads'. This was changed to read, '[a] number of hostile forces stepped up their activities to create political instability, rebellion and overthrow [*bao loan lat do*]. Our country again faced numerous dangerous ordeals' (Dang Cong San Viet Nam 1996a, 58). The section in the April draft report which dealt with the 'international situation' listed a number of post-Cold War conflicts and stated 'in some aspects these conflicts are mounting to a considerable extent'. This was deleted from the final version.

The consensus nature of the final Political Report may be illustrated with reference to the section on 'the characteristics of the international system' The congress report, for example, noted that 'with the collapse of socialism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, socialism has suffered a temporary set-back. This does not change the characteristics of our times, however; humanity is still living in the transitional period from capitalism to socialism...'. The Political Report went on to note, however, that the 'scientific and technological revolution is developing at an increasingly rapid pace, thereby accelerating various production forces and the process of globalisation of the world economy and social life'. According to Vu Khoan, 'this was the first time we had spoken of globalisation and assessed that it was an objective trend' (Vu Khoan, 2006).

The Political Report also juxtaposed the potential for conflict arising from competition in the areas of economics, science and technology with the potential for cooperation arising from global peace and stability. Or, to round

out this point, the Political Report noted the role of ‘socialist countries, communist and workers parties and revolutionary and progressive forces’ alongside peaceful coexistence and cooperation by ‘nations under different political regimes’.

Most remarkably, the foreign policy sections of the first two drafts barely mentioned Vietnam’s membership in ASEAN. These earlier drafts merely noted that Vietnam’s membership was one of the successes achieved after a decade of *doi moi*. After the public release of the draft report in April, ASEAN Ambassadors in Hanoi were reportedly furious that such an important event had been glossed over. As a result of their objections an appropriate reference was included in the final draft presented to the congress. The amended version read:

To strengthen our relations with neighbouring countries and ASEAN member countries, to constantly consolidate our ties with traditional friendly states, and attach importance to our relations with developed countries and political-economic centres in the world while at the same time upholding the spirit of solidarity and brotherliness with developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and with the Non-Aligned Movement.

The Political Report held that national defence, internal security and foreign relations were mutually reinforcing. According to the report, Vietnam’s first foreign policy priority is ‘to consolidate a peaceful environment and create more favourable international conditions in order to accelerate socio-economic development, implement national industrialisation and modernisation, and support the cause of national defence and construction’. In summary, the Political Report was a status quo document that reflected consensus in a number of policy areas. It did not develop or elaborate any major new policy themes such as ‘renovation’ adopted by the sixth congress, or ‘industrialisation and modernisation’ endorsed by the seventh congress.

The eighth congress was clearly divided over the leadership question. Do Muoi, then party Secretary General, resisted efforts to force his retirement. Eventually a compromise was reached under which all three of the most senior officials — Do Muoi, Le Duc Anh (state president) and Vo Van Kiet (prime minister) — would retire in mid-term.

The onset of the Asian Financial Crisis in mid-1997, coupled with major domestic peasant disturbances in Thai Binh province, served to accelerate leadership transition (Thayer 2001b). In December 1997, at the fourth Central Committee plenum, Le Kha Phieu replaced Do Muoi as party chief (on Phieu see Thayer 2003). Phieu and his supporters were extremely reluctant to undertake any policy initiative that would upset political stability. They sought to ‘batten down the hatches’ and ride out the financial storm. Concern with political stability was most evident in Vietnam’s eleventh hour decision

to postpone agreement on a bilateral trade agreement (BTA) with the United States in September 1999.

In November 1999, the VCP Central Committee's eighth plenum reviewed the draft text of the U.S.-Vietnam BTA in detail. These discussions revealed that those with vested interests in state-owned enterprises, including military-owned enterprises, were strongly opposed to opening up Vietnam's economy. Prime Minister Phan Van Khai was unable to obtain consensus and so in March 2000, Vietnam sent a letter to the United States listing a number of areas of the draft BTA that Vietnam wanted to reopen for negotiation.

Internal concerns about the terms of the draft BTA reflected longer standing anxieties about the pace and scope of economic reforms, and the degree to which Vietnam should open its economy and expose itself to the forces of globalisation. As the debate wore on party conservatives conceded that in order to achieve the objective of industrializing and modernizing Vietnam by 2020 Vietnam had no choice but to step up the rate of economic growth and encourage more foreign investment.

Vietnam's reform therefore effort gained new momentum after the Central Committee's tenth plenum concluded its deliberations in late June and early July 2000 (Thayer 2001a). Vietnam issued new implementing regulations for the Law on Foreign Investment. According to the plenum's final communiqué '[a]mong the key issues discussed... were problems of ownership and economic sectors in the transitional period to socialism; [and] building an independent and autonomous economy in the light of international economic integration...'

Of significance was the plenum's debate on the issue of an 'independent and self-reliant economy' and 'international economic integration'. The plenum concluded that there was no other choice but to continue with regional and global integration. The tenth plenum gave its approval for the new trade minister, Vu Khoan, to go to Washington to sign the BTA. Key clauses in this agreement were phased in over a period from three to nine years. For those seeking global economic integration, the BTA was a necessary step that Vietnam had to undertake in order to join the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

'Vuon Ra Bien Lon' –To Plunge into the Big Ocean

Since 2000, the national leadership of the Vietnam Communist Party has demonstrated greater consensus on the objective of integrating Vietnam's economy with the global economy or 'to plunge into the big ocean'. This was evident in the outcomes of the ninth and tenth party congresses. The Ninth Party Congress, which met from April 19–23, 2001, reaffirmed 'Vietnam wants to be a friend and a reliable partner to all nations' by diversifying and

multilateralizing its international relations (Thayer 2002a). Priority was placed on developing relations with 'socialist, neighboring and traditional friendly states'.¹⁷ The ninth congress set the goals of overcoming underdevelopment by the year 2010. and accelerating industrialization and modernization in order to become a modern industrialized state by 2020.

In order to accomplish these goals Vietnam would have to vigorously step up efforts to integrate itself with the global economy by pursuing membership in WTO. According to Vu Khoan (2006), the ninth congress resolution identified two main measures to attain this goal: 'first, perfect the regime of a market economy with socialist characteristics, and second, integrate deeper and more fully into the various global economic regimes. Integration into the global economy will tie our economy into the regional and global economies on the basis of common rules of the game'.¹⁸ One necessary step towards this end involved getting the United States Congress to grant Vietnam permanent normal trade relations status (PNTR).

In mid-2003, the VCP Central Committee's eighth plenum provided an important reinterpretation of two key ideological concepts – the 'objects of struggle' (*doi tuong*) and 'partners' (*doi tac*) in foreign relations. According to the eighth plenum's resolution, 'any force that plans and acts against the objectives we hold in the course of national construction and defense is the object of struggle'. And, 'anyone who respects our independence and sovereignty, establishes and expands friendly, equal, and mutually beneficial relations with Vietnam is our partner'. The eighth plenum resolution argued for a more sophisticated dialectical application of these concepts: 'with the objects of struggle, we can find areas for cooperation; with the partners, there exist interests that are contradictory and different from those of ours. We should be aware of these, thus overcoming the two tendencies, namely lacking vigilance and showing rigidity in our perception, design, and implementation of specific policies'.

The eighth plenum resolution thus provided the policy rationale for Vietnam to step up cooperative activities with the United States (Thayer 2005). After the plenum Vietnam advised the United States that it would accept a long-

¹⁷A Politburo resolution adopted in November 2001 sketched Vietnam's diplomatic strategy as follows: continue to strengthen relations with Vietnam's neighbours and countries that have been traditional friends; give importance to relations with big countries, developing countries, and the political and economic centers of the world; raise the level of solidarity with developing countries and the non-aligned movement; increase activities in international organizations; and develop relations with Communist and Workers' parties, with progressive forces, while at the same time expanding relations with ruling parties and other parties. Pay attention to people's diplomacy' (Vu Duong Ninh, 2002:110).

¹⁸This was the first time the concept of 'market economy with socialist characteristics' was endorsed (Le Xuan Tung, 2004:17).

standing invitation for its Defence Minister to visit Washington. Vietnam also approved the first port call by a US Navy warship since the Vietnam War. Vietnam and the United States also initiated a low-key counter-terrorism intelligence exchange.

The VCP convened its tenth national party congress in Hanoi from 18-25 April 2006 (Thayer 2007a). For the first time since 1951, no foreign delegates were invited to attend. According to the Political Report, Vietnam 'must strive to unswervingly carry out a foreign policy of... multilateral and diversified relationships while staying proactive in integrating into the world economic community and expanding international cooperation in other fields'. Following the congress, the Bush Administration removed Vietnam from the list of 'countries of particular concern' thus clearing the way for the granting of PNTR status. This occurred on the eve of President Bushes' visit to Hanoi to attend the APEC Summit in November 2006.

Vietnam's multi-year quest to become 'a reliable friend with all countries' achieved remarkable success in 2006. Former Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien offered the assessment that Vietnam's foreign policy reached three peaks in 2006 – hosting the APEC summit, gaining membership in the WTO and unanimous nomination by the Asia bloc for non-permanent membership on the United Nations (UN) Security Council (*Vietnam Economy*, 14 November 2006). In 2007, Vietnam was overwhelmingly elected by the UN General Assembly as a non-permanent member on the Security Council for a two-year period beginning in 2008.

Conclusion

This paper has traced in broad brush strokes the remarkable transformation in Vietnam's worldview from a rigid Marxist-Leninist framework of a globe divided into two hostile camps into a view of one global economy that offers opportunities and challenges to every state. Vietnam rejected the zero-sum view of the world divided into friends and enemies and sought to become friends with all countries. Between 1986-89 Vietnam abandoned central planning, a key feature of Marxist-Leninist development ideology. After two decades of debate, and the use of convoluted terminology, Vietnam now describes itself as a 'market economy with socialist orientations'.

Vietnam's adoption of the view that there is a single world community and a unified global economy, led it to develop a more positive outlook on global integration. Integration was no longer viewed as a process of assimilation (*hoa nhap*) but one of interdependence. Vietnam has also become a member of the World trade organization.

In jettisoning the view that the world is divided into hostile socialist and capitalist camps, Vietnam set the stage for developing cooperative relations

with non-socialist states on both a regional and global basis. This is turned to the adoption of the term 'national interest' as a guide to national security policy. Vietnam has developed a comprehensive view of national security that depreciates the relative importance of military power and elevates the salience of economic and other factors. Having said this, Vietnamese leaders still debate what constitutes the greatest threat to national security. For most of the period covered in this paper the relative importance of 'the threat of peaceful evolution' and 'the threat of falling behind' were viewed as the major threats.

There are still residues of 'old political thinking' especially in relation to the big powers. Party conservatives still view developing relations with the United States with considerable suspicion. They fear that US advocacy of democracy, human rights and religious freedom is part of a longer-term strategy of overthrowing one-party rule.¹⁹ Party conservatives still speak of hostile external forces and the threat of peaceful coexistence. A residue of 'old political thinking' may be found in Vietnam's views towards China. Party conservatives still value socialism as a thread uniting Vietnam and China. Others in the party are concerned about China's *real politik* behaviour in asserting sovereignty over the South China Sea (Thayer 2008d and forthcoming).

What factors account for this change? Which are more important, domestic or external factors? How and why this process occurred deserves further detailed study. Fortunately there is a growing body of literature on Vietnam's external relations written by Vietnamese scholars at home and abroad (Hoang Anh Tuan 1993, 1994, 1996 and Nguyen Vu Tung 1993, 2002, 2007). One western-trained scholar based in Hanoi has adopted the constructivist view that through interaction with ASEAN states Vietnam has developed a new identity (Nguyen Vu Tung 2002). A German-trained Vietnamese scholar, now resident in the United States, attributes foreign policy change to the contestation between senior leaders who favour global integration and those who oppose US imperialism. This has led to the alternation of 'four pathways' in Vietnam's relations with China (Vuving 2006).

This paper has stressed the importance of external shocks, such as domestic economic crisis and the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the role of individual leaders, such as Mikhail Gorbachev and Vo Van Kiet, as facilitators of change. But little is known about how new ideas were acquired and transmitted through Vietnam's political system. The author's field work in Vietnam in the 1980s and 1990s points to the importance of a network of

¹⁹These themes are especially prominent in text books used in the national defence education curriculum which is compulsory for all high school and university students.

Vietnamese advisers, Soviet-trained scholars and researchers working for the party, state and official institutes as keys to this process (Thayer 1986, 1989b and 1990c). Finally, this paper has argued that changes in Vietnam's in national security policy cannot be divorced from domestic factors and internal party politics. Vietnam's changing worldview and national security policies have led to a strengthening of national sovereignty through regional (Thayer 2007b) and global integration.

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