

An Analysis of the Adjustment of Vietnam's Defense Policy in Recent Years and Its Causes

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Under the influence of multiple factors such as Vietnam's rising comprehensive strength, the complex security situation in Southeast Asia, and the intensification of competition between China and the United States, Vietnam has adjusted its national defense policy in recent years, promulgated relevant regulations, cultivated and raised national defense awareness, continued to strengthen traditional security defense in border and coastal areas, and gradually expanded prevention and cooperation in non-traditional security areas. It has also combined defense construction with socio-economic development, prioritized defense investment in border areas, islands, and military modernization, developed military science and technology, and improved maritime military forces. It will also continue to diversify its defense cooperation and expand defense exchanges and cooperation with ASEAN and overseas powers. It will attach importance to defense and friendly relations in the border areas of China and Vietnam, while at the same time seeking to reap maximum benefits from the competition between major powers and disputes in the South China Sea. These policies will help Vietnam strengthen its defense forces and realize its aspirations as a regional military power.

Keywords: non-traditional security, military modernization, diversification of defense cooperation, Vietnam

Introduction

In recent years, the security environment in Southeast Asia has gradually become more complex, and traditional and non-traditional security issues have posed many challenges to the security landscape of the region and the defense and security of each country. In response to the changes in the world and regional situation, Vietnam has adjusted its defense policy in accordance with its comprehensive strength and perceived threats to the surrounding environment in order to consolidate its national interests and its position in the regional security pattern.

A number of studies have been done in the academic community on the adjustment of Vietnam's national defense policy. Some scholars have suggested that Vietnam mainly adopts hard checks and balances, soft checks and balances, direct participation, and economic pragmatism strategies to formulate and adjust its defense strategies and policies (Apila, 2021). According to some scholars, at the beginning of its innovation and opening up, Vietnam's defense policy was a combination of politics, economy, and military, using political negotiation to solve regional disputes and building a quality military; with the advancement of the innovation process and

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the improvement of comprehensive national power, Vietnam began to pay attention to the improvement of weapons performance and promote the concept of “national defense for all” (Wu, 2014). Some Vietnamese scholars believe that since the 12th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Vietnam has paid more attention to the integration of national defense and security with its diplomatic line, adhered to a defensive national defense policy, and emphasized the realization of fluid and diversified cooperation in national defense in the international community (Pan, 2016). At the same time, some scholars suggest that there should be close cooperation between defense and foreign policy makers to prevent defense policy adjustment options from being too restricted by an independent, self-reliant foreign policy (Huong, 2018). Vietnam's South China Sea policy is a hot topic of discussion in academic circles, and relevant scholars have published rich results from the perspectives of policy, diplomacy, history, and strategy, on Vietnam's policies and ways of fighting for its rights and interests in the South China Sea. In general, although scholars have studied Vietnam's defense policy from multiple perspectives, research tracking the adjustment of Vietnam's defense policy and its motives in recent years is not comprehensive enough. This paper is an attempt to sort out Vietnam's defense documents and official statements such as Vietnam's Defense White Paper, Vietnam's Defense Strategy, Vietnam's Military Strategy, Vietnam's Defense Law, and Vietnam's National Defense Strategy in the New Situation, and analyze in depth how Vietnam has adjusted its defense policy in recent years and the reasons for the adjustments in conjunction with relevant literature. This paper is an in-depth analysis of the adjustments in Vietnam's defense policy in recent years and the reasons for their impact, in order to provide us with materials for a more comprehensive understanding of the changes in Vietnam's defense policy.

Adjustment of Vietnam's Defense Policy in Recent Years

According to the definition presented in the Law of Vietnam on National Defense, “national defense” means the defense of the country through the comprehensive force of the whole nation (Socialist Republic of Vietnam Ministry of National Defense, 2018a). According to Pham Van Tha, former member of the Politburo and Minister of National Defense of Vietnam, Vietnam's national defense and military have achieved milestones in the past 20 years since the opening up of the country, and after entering the 21st century, Vietnam needs to change its national defense ideology to serve the cause of national innovation (Pham & Vei, 2005). In recent years, Vietnam has adjusted its defense policy in accordance with the changes in domestic and foreign situations, the growth of its comprehensive national power and its plans for a strong military power.

Revision of the National Defense Law to Strengthen National Defense Education for All

Vietnam's top brass and military have always attached importance to the cultivation of national defense awareness for all people. In recent years, Vietnam has revised the National Defense Law and introduced the Law on National Defense and Security Education to further enhance the awareness of national defense and military support for all people, and the position on “National Defense at Sea” was presented for the first time in the 2019 White Paper on National Defense of Vietnam, which upgraded the guiding ideology of “National Defense for All” and called for increased participation of the nation in national defense (Socialist Republic of Vietnam Ministry of National Defense, 2019).

Vietnam attaches great importance to the education of young students on national defense and security. The consensus of all sectors in Vietnam is that “defending the sovereignty and territorial integrity and the inviolability of borders and sea areas is an important task of the State and has become a sacred legal and moral obligation of

every generation of Vietnamese citizens” (Department of Defense Education, Ministry of Education and Training, Vietnam, 2007). On June 17, 2003, the Law on State Borders was adopted at the 3rd Session of the 11th National Assembly of Vietnam and came into effect on January 1, 2004. In accordance with the instructions of the Prime Minister of Vietnam on December 19, 2003 to prepare tutorials and materials on the Law on the State Border for the defense education of school and university students, the Department of Defense Education of the Ministry of Education of Vietnam organized the preparation and release of “Defending the State Territorial Border” (reference material for general secondary schools) in 2007 to meet the teaching and learning needs of teachers and students of general secondary schools. The reference material is divided into three parts: “Awareness of national territory, borders and national territorial sovereignty”, “Building, managing and defending national borders”, and “Responsibility for building, managing and defending national borders and border areas”. It is designed to introduce knowledge about national territory and borders and the significance and importance of national borders for sovereignty and territory, and thus to define learners’ responsibilities for the cause of building, managing, and defending the country’s borders (Department of Defense Education, Ministry of Education and Training, Vietnam, 2007).

Vietnam promulgated the Law on National Defense of Vietnam in June 2005. Due to changes in the domestic and international situation, the new Law on National Defense of Vietnam, adopted at the 5th Session of the 14th National Assembly on June 8, 2018 and effective from January 1, 2019, provides for the policy of “national defense” and national defense education for all. First, the policy of “national defense for all” is implemented, emphasizing that “consolidating and strengthening national defense is an important and regular task, mobilizing the comprehensive forces of the entire nation and the entire political system with the People’s Armed Forces as the backbone” and “mobilizing the potential of domestic sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity including land, islands, sea and air space”. Second, national defense and security education for all is conducted in accordance with the National Defense and Security Education Act and related regulations: “National defense security education is provided to students, college students, and cadets of state organs, political organizations, and schools of political and social organizations, and educational units of the national education system” to popularize national defense security knowledge and promote national defense policies and national defense-related laws to the whole population. Third, the document calls for building national defense and national defense positions for all people and cultivating national defense potential and strength. “National defense potential” refers to the ability to use domestic and foreign human, material, financial, and spiritual resources to carry out national defense tasks (Socialist Republic of Vietnam Ministry of National Defense, 2018a).

The Vietnamese government also attaches importance to the propagation and interpretation of the Vietnam Defense Law, the Vietnam Defense White Paper, and other related documents. The Law on National Defense of Vietnam stipulates that “the Party’s national defense line and views, national defense policies and laws shall be publicized and popularized” (Socialist Republic of Vietnam Ministry of National Defense, 2018a). Vietnamese military leaders and researchers also write articles interpreting and promoting defense-related regulations. For example, Major General Nguyen Manh Hung proposed in an article in the National Defense Magazine that Vietnam’s national defense strategy is a product of the institutionalization of the military line in the new era and has the characteristics of operating in construction (Nguyen, 2018). Senior Colonel Yang Van Hung of Vietnam’s National Defense Strategy Institute also issued an article interpreting the Vietnam National Defense Law, arguing that the modernization of the defense industry and dual-use construction are the cornerstones of national defense

security, and that science and solidity are the current features of the modernization and construction of national defense (Yang, 2021).

Combining National Defense Construction With Economic and Social Development and Prioritizing Investment in Border Areas and Islands in the National Defense Budget

Vietnam implements “comprehensive” and “universal” national defense, focusing on the synergistic development of military and political, economic, and cultural aspects. The Law on National Defense of Vietnam (2018) stipulates that the national defense budget “prioritizes investment in border areas, islands, strategic priority areas, defense strongholds and some modernized people’s army forces”; formulates special policies on national defense in border areas, islands, strategic priority areas, and strongholds; and safeguards national defense in the economic, social, and foreign fields. The Vietnamese government emphasizes the integration of national defense and economic and social development, i.e., linking all national defense activities with economic activities under the unified management of the state to achieve the dual objectives of national defense forces and economic development (Socialist Republic of Vietnam Ministry of National Defense, 2018a). The Vietnam National Border Protection Strategy and the Vietnam Law on Border Protection have been implemented simultaneously to strengthen the construction of border defense, the universal border defense system, and the universal border defense position have been gradually built up and strengthened, and the border cooperation environment has been optimized. For example, in 2020, the Prime Minister of the Vietnamese government approved eight key border crossing economic zones and was approved to focus investment in the state budget for the period of 2021-2025 (TTXVN/Vietnam+, 2020a). At the same time, Vietnam has also set up a number of projects that combine economic development and defense construction, such as the “Industrial Pioneer Project” launched in 2020, which invests in defense company Viettel’s military industry and telecom industry (Jon, 2020).

Further Strengthening the Response and Cooperation on Non-traditional Security Issues

In recent years, the position of effective response to non-traditional security issues in Vietnam’s defense policy has increased year by year. The resolution of the 11th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) determined that Vietnam is “prepared to deal with non-traditional security”, the resolution of the 12th National Congress of the CPV placed non-traditional security above traditional security, and the 13th National Congress of the CPV proposed to respond quickly and effectively to non-traditional security threats (Nguyen, 2021). Recently, “non-traditional security issues have become the first choice for security cooperation among Vietnam’s defense and security cooperation in the region or around the world” (Nguyen, 2021). In the first part of the 2019 Vietnam Defense White Paper, “non-traditional security” appears five times in the strategic context analysis, with high frequency of mentioning non-traditional security issues such as climate issues, terrorism, and cyber-attacks, indicating that non-traditional security issues have become the focus of Vietnam’s defense threat perception. In his analysis of Vietnam’s maritime security policy on non-traditional security issues in the East Sea (or the South China Sea, as China calls it), Senior Colonel Vu Qing, an expert on Vietnamese international issues, said that Vietnam mainly advocates the use of its own internal strength and international cooperation to deal with non-traditional security issues based on the principles of respect for independent sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in each other’s internal affairs. In the face of the cooperative interaction between traditional and non-traditional security, Vietnam’s strategic choice is to “properly” and “correctly” handle the relationship between the two and “proactively” address the non-traditional

security challenges. The strategic choice for Vietnam is to “properly” manage the relationship between the two and “proactively” address non-traditional security challenges (TTXVN/Vietnam+, 2014).

Vietnam's security departments are increasingly monitoring and defending against non-traditional security issues. Since 2009, Vietnam has increased its regulatory oversight of cybersecurity and achieved significant results. According to the ranking of the Vietnam Information Security Agency's 2018 Information Security Assessment Report for State Agencies and Organizations, Vietnam ranks 50th in the global cybersecurity ranking (up 51 places from 2017), 11th in the Asia-Pacific region, and 5th among Southeast Asian countries; Vietnam's cybersecurity has a clear trend of improvement (Vietnam People's Daily, 2019). Vietnam has also continued to strengthen the use of laws to regulate the emerging cyber market, and the Law on Cyber Security, adopted at the fifth session of the 14th National Assembly in 2018, clearly states that ideological security on the Internet, information security of state secrets, and cyber security in the military sector are strictly protected by law. Vietnam has gradually improved its cybersecurity mechanisms in the new round of the national defense plan and established a new Cyberspace Operations Command to safeguard Vietnam's cyberspace sovereignty and defend against any “peaceful evolution” of public opinion by unscrupulous elements that undermine national stability. The Vietnam National Defense Law proposes a plan to “build national defense for all”, including “developing defense and security industries, military science and technology, utilizing the scientific and technological potential of the State and the people to serve national defense, and applying appropriate military scientific and technological achievements to build the motherland” (Socialist Republic of Vietnam Ministry of National Defense, 2018a) in addition to formulating and organizing plans and measures to implement information warfare and cyberspace warfare. Vietnam's cybersecurity defense capabilities have improved significantly in the last two years, with Vietnam's defense cyber score improving by 5.4 points in 2020, making it the most upwardly mobile of any Asia-Pacific country, according to the *Lowy Institute's Power in Asia Report* (Lowy Institute, 2021).

The South China Sea Remains the Focus of Vietnam's Defense Policy

In the past decade, Vietnam's South China Sea policy has been characterized by a combination of softness and hardness, rigidity and flexibility, and has continuously incorporated the South China Sea issue into ASEAN, “ASEANizing” and “internationalizing” it.

Vietnam has gradually diversified the way it defends its rights and interests in the South China Sea, retreating in order to win the support of the international community. In order to avoid direct conflicts caused by sovereignty disputes, Vietnam has taken the opportunity of being the rotating chair of ASEAN and a non-permanent member of the UN to actively promote the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea at the UN General Assembly, ASEAN Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit, and other international forums, such as: In September 2020, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam and President Nguyen Phu Trong called on all parties at the high-level general debate of the UN General Assembly to exercise restraint and avoid taking unilateral action to worsen the situation (UN, 2020). At the informal meeting of ASEAN defense ministers in November 2021, Vietnamese representative Senior General Phan Van Giang urged ASEAN countries to adhere to their principled positions on the South China Sea, practice the UN Maritime Conventions Act (1982), and promote the effective implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (Nhan Dan, 2021). At the 13th International Symposium on the East China Sea held in Vietnam in the same month, “strengthening communication and dialogue among sovereignty claimants in the South China Sea and finding solutions acceptable to all parties”

(TTXVN/Vietnam⁺, 2021a) was discussed as one of the four major issues. The 2019 White Paper on Vietnam's National Defense states that Vietnam supports and protects freedom of navigation and aviation in the South China Sea, does not act to complicate the situation or expand disputes, does not engage in militarization, and does not use force or threaten to use force (Socialist Republic of Viet Nam Ministry of National Defence, 2019). During its presidency of ASEAN and as a non-permanent member of the United Nations, Vietnam advocated de-escalation of disputes over the South China Sea as a way to win international public support for its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea.

Secondly, Vietnam has chosen to put aside highly sensitive issues, prioritize the development of the maritime economy in the South China Sea region, and strive for more interests in the South China Sea region in a gradual manner from the fields of environmental cooperation and economic cooperation. The Strategy and Vision for the Sustainable Development of Vietnam's Maritime Economy from 2020 to 2045, adopted at the 8th Meeting of the 12th Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam in October 2018, adopted the goals of having the maritime economy contribute 10% of Vietnam's GDP by 2030, and developing Vietnam into a prosperous, secure, and sustainable maritime power in 2045 (TTXVN/Vietnam⁺, 2021b). Vietnam has also actively strengthened exchanges and cooperation with the US, Japan, Russia, India, Australia, and ASEAN countries in the fields of marine environmental protection, marine scientific research, maritime navigation and communication safety, and search and rescue operations, bringing in outside forces to develop marine resources in the South China Sea. Against the backdrop of intensifying competition between China and the US, Vietnam proposes to take effective measures internally to protect its territorial integrity, maritime rights and interests, and a stable living environment for its people, and to take a neutral position externally to flexibly respond to the complex security situation (Tung, 2010).

Continuing to Promote Military Modernization

Improving military strength and modernizing the army have always been the focus of Vietnam's defense construction and strategic deployment, and this trend has been increasing in recent years.

In the construction of the army, it has insisted on "quality building" and promoted the scientific development of the army and recruitment of young adults. It is also important to upgrade and improve the organization system of the People's Army and improve the overall quality of the military leadership. In order to build a young and professional army leadership team, the Ministry of Defense of Vietnam, on the one hand, stipulates that military men aged 50-53 and women aged 45-48 can apply for early retirement, and on the other hand selects young talent for regular training, and strengthens foreign exchange and study of military tactics. In recent years, Vietnam has sent its personnel to participate in the ASEAN Defense Exchange Program (ADMM) and ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM+), ASEAN Military Medical Center (AMMC), Network of Peacekeeping Centers (NPMC), Maritime Security Expert Group Meeting (MSEGM), and other thematic meetings on defense and security construction to strengthen military exchanges and learn advanced military technologies and tactics from foreign countries.

Vietnam's Ministry of Defense continues to expand arms imports and improve military research capabilities. Since the opening of the country, Vietnam's military budget has maintained a steady growth trend, and it has continuously imported foreign military technology and weaponry to improve the hard power of the military. According to the incomplete statistics of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, since 2009, Belarus, Israel, Russia, Slovakia, South Korea, Spain, Ukraine, etc., have made arms transfers to Vietnam. In 2017,

Vietnam also formally accepted arms transfers from the U.S., ending the history of the U.S. ban on arms sales to Vietnam, and in 2019 alone, Vietnam introduced 30 vessels from the U.S. In 2019 alone, Vietnam imported 30 “Metal Shark” patrol boats and one Hamilton-class patrol ship from the United States, which will strongly promote the modernization of Vietnam’s water vessels. Vietnam has imported fighter jets from the U.S., Russia, and Ukraine, and sought the transfer of air defense radar development technology from relevant countries to lay the foundation for independent development of air defense radar technology to achieve further upgrades of air defense radar systems; in terms of army equipment, it has imported and modified armored equipment, improved artillery as well as ammunition performance, and optimized gun construction (Qin, 2021). During the period from 2010 to 2020, Vietnam imported ships worth about \$3.074 billion, aircraft worth \$1.841 billion, and missiles worth about \$975 million (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2021). Vietnam’s arms imports with some Southeast Asian countries and their ranking among countries in the world in 2009-2021 are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

Selected Southeast Asian Countries' Arms Imports and World Ranking (2009-2021) (in Millions of US Dollars)

Country	Year														Sum	Rank
	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021			
Singapore	1,429	958	895	745	749	65	147	633	430	594	517	180	157	7,499	14	
Vietnam	60	150	1,010	780	362	1,212	855	909	783	604	160	32	244	7,159	15	
Indonesia	442	225	249	212	823	1,190	438	380	1,169	339	212	269	328	6,275	18	
Thailand	63	58	249	272	378	104	182	340	322	628	291	154	136	3,178	32	
Malaysia	1,514	437	5	17	77	73	118	283	193	90	67	58	84	3,016	33	
Myanmar	62	59	668	395	250	102	244	283	215	188	193	212	60	2,933	34	
Philippines	1	3	63	16	78	12	153	227	276	18	187	349	349	1,732	44	

Notes. Brunei, Cambodia, and Laos are not counted due to missing data. Source: Based on statistics compiled from the latest data report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, https://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_toplist.php, landed on October 6, 2022.

Vietnam is also actively promoting the development of its military industry. The Ministry of Defense relies on the General Department of Defense Industry, military academies, and research centers to cultivate military industrial talent, explore scientific and technological potential, and research and develop more modern, high-level, high-tech military weapons. The Vietnam National Defense Strategy, released at the Meeting of the 12th Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam Central Committee on April 16, 2018, proposes that Vietnam should build an “advanced”, “modernized”, and “self-reliant” defense industry (Vietnam People’s Army Network, 2019a). Vietnam has formulated and implemented regulations such as the Decree on Defense Industry and the Vietnam Defense Industry Construction Development Plan 2025-2035 to establish defense economic zones in various regions, and as of 2019 Vietnam has set up 28 defense economic zones and defense economic missions to promote the development of defense industry. It can be seen that in the modernization of its land, sea, and air forces, Vietnam is trying to upgrade comprehensively from weapons import to weapons development, and the overall weapons stockpile and military power are steadily improving.

Implementing a Balanced Strategy of Major Powers and More Diversified Defense Cooperation

After the 13th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, the military’s influence in Vietnam’s political system has increased, military defense diplomacy has become more closely integrated with the balance of power strategy, and defense bilateral and multilateral exchanges and cooperation have been further strengthened.

Vietnam combines diplomacy and defense, and implements an all-round diplomatic layout (Le, 2021), with diplomatic relations as the axis, gradually forming an all-round, multilateral pattern of defense cooperation relations. Currently, Vietnam has established strategic partnerships with 16 countries, comprehensive partnerships with 11 countries, and special strategic relations with countries with closely linked core interests such as Laos and Cambodia. As of 2019, Vietnam had established defense relations with more than 80 countries and organizations, 15 more countries and regions than in 2009; established defense attaché offices in the United Nations and 37 countries, six more countries than in 2009; and 49 countries have established defense and military attaché offices in Vietnam, seven more countries than in 2009 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam Ministry of National Defense, 2019).

Vietnam's defense cooperation with ASEAN has become more diversified in content and denser in its network of cooperative relations. According to the statistics of the 2019 Vietnam Defense White Paper, Vietnam has carried out eight defense cooperation projects within the framework of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and in addition to traditional security issues such as maritime security and nuclear weapons security, it has dedicated non-traditional security meetings such as the Conference on Natural Disaster Relief during the ARF (ISM-DR) and the ARF Conference on Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime (ISM-CTTC). Vietnam also participates in ASEAN military personnel training cooperation. As of 2019, Vietnam has participated in nine military personnel exchange training programs within the ASEAN organization, holding meetings with military representatives of ASEAN countries at different levels to negotiate cooperation related to training of air, land, and sea defense personnel, defense intelligence sharing, and combat technology exploration.

Vietnam's military security exchanges and cooperation with the United States and the European Union have been particularly prominent in recent years. The U.S. military has visited Vietnam more often in recent years, with Vietnam receiving two visits from U.S. aircraft carriers in 2018-2020 and as many as five visits by senior U.S. military officials in 2019 after Trump's "Trump-Kim Meeting" in Vietnam; the U.S. has also helped Vietnam train air force pilots and expand air force cooperation; the U.S. and Vietnam signed the Memorandum of Understanding on Assistance to Persons with Disabilities in Key Provinces, and actively negotiated the remaining issues of the Vietnam War. Vietnam's strengthening of defense cooperation relations with the European Union, the United Nations, and other international organizations is also noteworthy. In October 2019, Vietnam and the European Union signed the Agreement on Vietnam's Participation in the EU Crisis Management Action (FPA) Framework, in which the EU made Vietnam a pilot country in the EU's strategic plan for implementing security cooperation in Asia (Vietnam People's Army Network, 2019b). Vietnam also actively participates in relevant activities within the UN organizations, continuously increasing Vietnam's appearance and participation in international actions to build a good international image. After the 13th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Vietnam put forward important elements of its national defense and security policy concerns for 2021-2025: National defense and security will be more closely integrated with economy, culture and diplomacy, with simultaneous implementation of military strategy, border defense strategy, national security and defense strategy, cyberspace defense strategy, and important changes in partnership with other countries, dealing with non-traditional security issues in a more timely manner, and continuously promoting modernization of the People's Army (National Politics-Truth, 2021).

Reasons for Vietnam's Defense Policy Adjustment

Policy choices are made by national decision makers after assessing many factors at the international and domestic levels, including the international environment and national capabilities, and weighing the pros and

cons according to national interests (Zuo & Tang, 2012). Vietnam's adjustment of defense policy in recent years has been mainly for the following reasons.

Increasing Non-traditional Security Issues

In recent years, non-traditional security issues such as cyber security, natural disasters, arms smuggling, illegal migration, and terrorism have become increasingly prominent and become the main security risk issues facing Vietnam. The cyber security issue is one of the serious challenges currently encountered by Vietnam, in which, according to Vietnam News Agency, 70% of the population are Internet users as of January 2020. The e-commerce market size is estimated to reach \$43 billion in trade volume during 2015-2025, ranking third among ASEAN member countries. However, Vietnam's cybersecurity environment is very unsatisfactory, with the highest rate of ransomware infections in the Asia-Pacific region in 2019, the third highest frequency of attacks using cryptocurrencies, and double the number of passing attacks compared to the global average (TTXVN/Vietnam+, 2020b). At the same time, Vietnam has been frequently attacked by online media for "peaceful evolution" in the ideological propaganda of national governance and political institution building.

Rapid industrial development and overexploitation of agriculture have caused climate change, and environmental security issues have also been a thorny issue for Vietnam in recent years. Between 2015-2017, El Niño and unstable monsoons led to the worst drought in Vietnam in 90 years, affecting more than two million people in 52 provinces, and the first negative growth in agriculture on record in 2015. According to a UN study on disaster impacts in Asia-Pacific countries for 2005-2030, Vietnam has the third highest number of affected people among Asia-Pacific countries, with 3,615 people per million affected per year during 2005-2015 and a mortality rate of 1.455 per million people; by 2020-2030, it is estimated that Vietnam will still have 3,237 people per million people affected per year and a mortality rate of 1.455 per million people. In other words, progress in disaster risk reduction and disaster impact reduction in Vietnam is still very limited (UNESCAP, 2018).

Transnational crime problems such as arms smuggling, smuggling of other goods, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and money laundering also challenge Vietnam's border security and social security management to varying degrees. According to the analysis of the Vietnam Country Report issued by HIS Markit Information in London, UK, the Vietnam-Laos border and Vietnam-Cambodia border are the main transit points for drugs and weapons, respectively, to enter Vietnam. Statistics from the U.S. Global Financial Integrity think tank show that Vietnam has been the largest recipient of illicit financial inflows in the world in recent years, with \$22.5 billion flowing into Vietnam between 2006 and 2019. Although Vietnamese stakeholders deny the accuracy of this data, problems such as financial crimes and the smuggling trade have existed in Vietnam for a long time. On the issue of transnational human trafficking, women, children, and laborers in Vietnam have become the main victims. From 2010 to June 2021, there were about 3,500 cases of human trafficking in Vietnam, involving 5,000 people and nearly 7,500 victims (TTXVN/Vietnam+, 2021c). Vietnam's legal framework for controlling human trafficking remains flawed, with trafficked persons recognized as both victims and criminals under Vietnamese law, and the dual status of trafficked persons has resulted in ineffective management of transnational human trafficking in Vietnam, further delaying the progress of illegal migration (Thi, 2015).

The growing problem of transnational crime has had an increasingly serious negative impact on Vietnam's socio-economic development and the stability of the Communist regime. Therefore, in recent years, Vietnam has paid great attention to non-traditional security issues, not only formulating relevant policies and increasing efforts

to combat transnational crime, but also strengthening relevant cooperation with ASEAN countries, extra-regional countries, and international organizations.

China-US Strategic Game Affects Vietnam's Security Cooperation Posture

In recent years, due to the growth of China's comprehensive power and the prominence of socialist ideology, the United States regards China as its chief competitor and implements the Asia-Pacific balancing strategy, drawing in China's neighboring countries to weaken China's influence, while enhancing U.S.-Vietnam relations is an important element of the U.S. Asia-Pacific balancing strategy. During the Obama administration (2009-2017), the U.S. strategy in Southeast Asia tended to be "selective multilateralism", proposing the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) on the economic front, consolidating military relations with traditional allies such as Thailand and the Philippines on the one hand, and promoting cooperative relations with Vietnam and other countries with which China has territorial disputes on the other. During Obama's visit to Vietnam in 2016, he frequently signaled that he would strengthen U.S.-Vietnam friendship and cooperation, trying to restrain China's influence in Southeast Asia by strengthening U.S.-Vietnam relations; he also withdrew the U.S. embargo on the sale of anti-personnel weapons to Vietnam, conveying the sincerity of the U.S. in drawing Vietnam closer. During the Trump period (2017-2021), the United States attached importance to building a united front with Southeast Asian countries to deal with the North Korean nuclear issue, the South China Sea issue, and the rise of China, forcing Southeast Asian countries to take a prominent stand on security issues; the U.S. military's "freedom of navigation operations" in the South China Sea is becoming more and more intensive, and in 2018, the U.S. military sent four carrier strike groups, four amphibious alert brigades, several nuclear-powered attack submarines, and more than 30 bombers to carry out military deterrence in the South China Sea and surrounding areas, with increasingly strong military intervention; the U.S. strategic arrangements for Southeast Asia are clearly differentiated, and although overall assistance to ASEAN countries has been reduced, assistance to Vietnam has not been reduced, and the U.S.-Vietnam strategic interaction is also more proactive and positive (Bich, 2019). In 2019, it was proposed that the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy prioritize the building of U.S.-Vietnam relations (United States Department of Defense, 2019). Since Biden came to power in 2021, he has continued to implement Trump's policy of strengthening U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation, dispatching Defense Secretary Austin, Vice President Harris, and others to visit Vietnam one after another to promote U.S.-Vietnam maritime security cooperation and actively provide a series of help for Vietnam to enhance its combat capabilities in the South China Sea; promote strengthened cooperation by South Korea, Japan, and other U.S. allies with Vietnam in order to achieve the purpose of separating China and Vietnam; stabilize U.S.-Philippines and U.S.-Thailand relations, strengthen U.S. military cooperation with ASEAN countries, and enhance the counter strength of ASEAN countries in the South China Sea.

With the adjustment of U.S. strategy towards Southeast Asia, China's strategic arrangement towards Southeast Asia has also changed, and its strategic choice towards Southeast Asian countries has become more and more focused on closeness of cooperation. First, on the basis of "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and cooperation", China will strengthen economic and trade cooperation and humanistic exchanges with ASEAN countries, accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, formally establish a strategic partnership between China and ASEAN, and build mutual trust in political security. Secondly, China should develop extensive and in-depth cooperation with ASEAN in non-traditional security fields and follow the principle of "setting aside disputes and joint development" in dealing with the South China Sea issue; thirdly, it

supports regional cooperation based on the principles of “ASEAN as the core” and “ASEAN way”, and actively participates in ASEAN-led dialogue mechanisms such as China-ASEAN 10+1, ASEAN-China-Japan-South Korea 10+3, East Asia Summit and ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Expanded Meeting to discuss regional security cooperation issues. Fourthly, the 19th Communist Party of China (CPC) National Congress has adjusted its foreign policy to “being friendly, sincere, tolerant, good to our neighbors, and neighborly” and made ASEAN a priority region for building neighborly diplomacy. At the 20th China-ASEAN Leaders’ Meeting, China proposed to “insist on being good neighbors, good friends and good partners with ASEAN, sharing the same boat, and working together to build a community of destiny with common ideas, shared prosperity and shared responsibilities” (Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2017). In terms of relations with Vietnam, it will consolidate the friendship of “comrades and brothers” and promote a comprehensive strategic partnership with the vision of building a community of destiny with strategic significance for both sides. In response to the frequent use of weapons sales, military exercises, and disputes in the South China Sea by the U.S. to put Vietnam under pressure, Wang Yi, during his visit to Vietnam in 2021, called on China and Vietnam to jointly resist provocations by “extraterritorial forces”, to put the South China Sea issue in its proper place in bilateral relations, and to refrain from taking unilateral action that would complicate the situation and expand the dispute (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2021).

Faced with the strategic adjustment and intensified competition between China and the United States, Vietnam is generally in a wait-and-see posture, maintaining bilateral security cooperation with the United States while continuously strengthening multilateral security cooperation with ASEAN at its core, so that Vietnam can get the “backing” of the United States in dealing with the South China Sea issue. As for how to choose between China and the U.S., Vietnam has remained relatively consistent with the decisions of many ASEAN countries, mediating with stakeholder countries on sensitive issues, trying to avoid direct conflicts of interest with neighboring powers, and circumventing economic or security sanctions by major powers.

Reduced Intra-regional Security Dependence and Increased Pressure on Neighboring Countries for “Security Self-Help” in General

After the Cold War, mutual relations between the U.S., Japan, China, Russia, and ASEAN have been comprehensively adjusted and repositioned, with each party avoiding political and military alliances with the other party that are clearly aimed at third parties (Xi, 1994). The U.S. no longer protects Southeast Asian countries with strong bilateral military alliance treaties, but emphasizes the importance of multilateral security cooperation; the U.S. adjusts its plans for arms sales and joint exercises to Southeast Asian countries, and offers military assistance conditionally to influence the positions of Southeast Asian countries in dealing with the South China Sea issue. Having to “choose sides” has made Southeast Asian countries more cautious about U.S. intervention in security issues. The intensified competition between China and the United States has made it difficult for Southeast Asian countries to predict the development of the regional situation, and the lack of security independence has made Southeast Asian countries more and more conscious of the importance of a strong national defense, balance of power, and security and self-protection.

The defense policies of Southeast Asian countries generally emphasize the enhancement of autonomous defense capabilities. Malaysia advocates enhancing its defense capabilities through total defense and partnership, adheres to a policy of neutrality in foreign relations to reduce dependence on foreign defense capabilities, and adheres to the principles of innovation and integration to enhance military science and technology research and

development capabilities (Ministry of Defense of Malaysia, 2020). The Philippines, recognizing that existing defense forces have difficulty effectively responding to the threats of traditional and non-traditional security issues, emphasizes improving the construction of its own military facilities, promoting the modernization of its navy and air force, attracting foreign military technology transfer, and developing its own defense industry, so as to effectively enhance its defense capabilities. Indonesia implements a maritime power strategy, promotes the building of maritime military forces, increases the enthusiasm of civil society to protect maritime security rights and interests, follows the principles of peace and stability, and emphasizes active defense in response to conventional military threats. Against the backdrop of intensifying competition between China and the United States, Southeast Asian countries emphasize that only by improving their national defense and security “self-protection” capabilities can the region avoid becoming a casualty of strategic competition and even confrontation between major powers.

Based on the reduced reliance on security in the region and the general increase in the pressure of “security self-help” from neighboring countries, Vietnam is actively promoting the modernization of its military and improving the level of defense science and technology to enhance its national defense self-help capability; Vietnam also proposed the “four no’s” principle in the 2019 Vietnam Defense White Paper to deal with foreign military relations and regional military conflicts: Vietnam advocates not participating in military alliances; not uniting one country against another; not allowing foreign countries to set up military bases on Vietnamese territory or use Vietnamese territory against other countries; and not using force or threatening to use force in international relations (Socialist Republic of Vietnam Ministry of National Defense, 2019).

Vietnam’s Domestic Economic Ecology Has Turned for the Better, Laying the Economic Foundation for National Defense Modernization

Since the period of innovation and opening began, Vietnam’s economy had continued to develop, and its comprehensive national power had been increasing. According to the World Bank, Vietnam’s annual GDP growth rate has remained above 6% between 2014 and 2019, with a growth rate of 7.1% in 2019 and a total GDP of US\$261.9 billion (World Bank, 2021). Vietnam emphasizes the combination of national defense construction and economic and social development, forming a two-way model of economic assistance to the military and military feeding the economy. The growth of comprehensive national power has provided an economic basis for Vietnam to increase arms imports to enhance its armament capabilities and promote modern military construction. From 2009 to 2021, Vietnam’s total arms imports will be \$7.159 billion, ranking 15th among the top 50 countries in terms of total arms imports and the second among the 10 ASEAN countries (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2020).

Economic development has also provided more space for Vietnam to develop multifaceted foreign military cooperation. In recent years, Vietnam has achieved remarkable results in military R&D cooperation with Russia, the two sides signed the Ordinance on Vietnam-Russia Integrated Center for Tropical Science and Technology, and the Vietnam-Russia Tropical Center has completed 110 scientific research projects from 2010 to 2018, including 23 mixed Vietnam-Russia projects and tasks, seven national projects, and 21 Ministry of Defense level projects, and many scientific research products have served the defense industry and economic development (Vietnam National Defense Magazine, 2018). From 2019 to 2020, Vietnam and Russia have carried out more than 50 military cooperation programs, and the two countries’ defense ministries have jointly celebrated the completion of more than 100 scientific research projects (Vietnam People’s Network, 2020). The development

model combining economic and social development with military development provides a material basis for Vietnam to promote military modernization, balanced diplomacy, and multilateral security cooperation, and in turn military modernization and diversified security cooperation provides stable border defense and a favorable surrounding environment for Vietnam's domestic socio-economic development.

Conclusion

In summary, Vietnam's defense policy has been adjusted flexibly and carefully, considering the three factors of major power relations, the regional situation, and Vietnam's own conditions. In dealing with many challenges to regional security, Vietnam has taken the premise of safeguarding national interests, focusing on ASEAN, taking non-traditional security issues as an entry point, relying on many international conventions, and following a non-forceful, consultative, and non-side-selective approach, which has provided more opportunities for Vietnam to develop military cooperation with neighboring countries and major powers, guaranteeing Vietnam's current peaceful and stable domestic and foreign development environment, while also strongly promoting Vietnam's defense modernization and overall improvement of defense capabilities. As Vietnamese officials say, Vietnam's active efforts to build and strengthen strategic mutual trust with neighboring countries, great powers, and traditional friends will create new forces and positions for Vietnam's defense and security (Socialist Republic of Vietnam Ministry of National Defense, 2018b).

At the same time, Vietnam's emphasis on promoting defense modernization and participating in regional cooperation in non-traditional security areas will play a role in promoting ASEAN member states' improvement of their defense and security levels and regional governance capabilities. However, it is also worth considering whether Vietnam's year-by-year increase in arms imports and its emphasis on arms development within ASEAN will strengthen the ranks and advance the arms race among Southeast Asian countries, as well as bring instability to the regional security pattern in Southeast Asia and Sino-Vietnamese relations.

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