



## **Vietnam's Security Challenges: Dilemmas of Reform Communism**

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This article evaluates internal and external challenges to the control of Vietnam's Communist Party (VCP). The VCP presently retains a monopoly on power amid extraordinary changes and challenges accompanying Vietnam's transformation into a vibrant trading nation, with a majority of its population born after the violent reunification of 1975. The VCP is coping with gradually rising demands for more political freedom and pluralism while simultaneously seeking to deal with external challenges from China, the United States, and the globalized trading system. Although Marxism in Vietnam is steadily crumbling, Vietnam's special form of Leninist authoritarianism, led by the VCP, is likely to continue for many years to come.

*Hostile outside forces cooperate with reactionary elements inside our country. . . .*

—Vietnamese senior officer to author, Hanoi, March 2005

### **Hanoi's Fundamental Dilemma**

The Communist Party of Vietnam's (VCP) perception of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's (SRV) external security environment, although relaxing somewhat under the impact of globalization, periodically reverts to the more familiar Communist Party refrain about foreign-instigated internal subversion. Such is the background behind the epigraph to this article, a statement offered to me in spring 2005 by an officer at the National Defense Academy in Hanoi. Vietnam's Ministry of Defense (MOD) formalized these types of concerns in its 2004 white paper on defense: "Vietnam is facing the threat of schemes and ploys by external hostile elements in collusion with internal reactionaries to interfere in Vietnam's internal affairs and to cause socio-political instability in Vietnam."<sup>1</sup>

In truth, VCP authorities *do* have reasons to be worried—both about how their rule is viewed by the Vietnamese population and about how long the Party's exclusive control of Vietnamese affairs can last. These worries

have accumulated for a variety of reasons, not the least being that Vietnamese society today bears little resemblance to that which emerged after Hanoi's 1975 Communist "liberation" of South Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> In the thirty-two years since North Vietnam's Soviet-supplied tanks battered down the gates of the Republic of Vietnam's Presidential offices in Saigon, extinguishing what remained of that country's valiant, tragic defense effort and freedom of choice, the population of unified Vietnam has grown from 40 million to 84 million. Despite resistance by Party conservatives, Vietnam has become a robust trading nation where exports and imports combine to equal almost the size of the GDP itself. And, not surprisingly, one finds a hard-working, literate, and multilingual Vietnamese workforce, most of whom are too young to have any memory of the Second Indochina War (1959–75), not to mention much interest in it, either. Indeed, the majority of Vietnam's present population was born after the country's violent reunification in 1975.

This article evaluates challenges to the control of the Communist Party of Vietnam, both internal and external, as the VCP retains power amid extraordinary changes and challenges accompanying Vietnam's transformation into a vibrant trading nation. Hanoi's fundamental dilemma is the classic problem of reform Communism everywhere in Asia: How can Communist authorities maintain exclusive, one-party political dominance while opening the national economy to the forces of globalization, foreign investment, and trade? Indeed, there is no guarantee that they will be successful. Experimentation and policy zigzags, undergirded with substantial corruption, have characterized Vietnam's economic development and its growing liberation from Communist orthodoxy.

### **Internal Security: More Demands for Freedom**

As in China, Laos and—of course—North Korea, Communist authorities in Vietnam worry about "social unrest" and "instability," concerns prompted, in part, by the corruption and arrogance of numerous Vietnamese party functionaries and the business oligarchs who collude with them, even as the country's economy has dramatically engaged with the Asian region and other areas. Public anger over state corruption in Vietnam periodically boils over, and, in surveys of foreign businesspeople, Vietnam is ranked among the most corrupt countries in Asia. Indeed, Transparency International's 2005 "Corruption Perception Index" rated Vietnam as close to the most corrupt country in the world. The graft is particularly evident in the collusion among senior Party members, state-owned enterprises, and the larger state banks, where non-performing loans routinely underwrite business deals, often of a speculative nature, amid a stock market that has zoomed in recent years.<sup>3</sup>

The clamor about these dealings, for example, has Party operatives identifying threats from “dissidents,” “cyber-dissidents” (Internet activists), ethnic minorities, religious activists (sometimes labeled “insane” or “delusional”), and the usual criminal and gang elements—a shifting collage of “difficult” people who keep popping up, people who have to be monitored, detained, exiled, or—in extreme cases—made to disappear.<sup>4</sup> Serious ethnic minority demonstrations took place in the Central Highlands in February 2001, and reoccurrences broke out in April and December 2004. Hanoi’s determination to control Vietnam’s ethnic minorities prompts combinations of secret-police activities and regular army presence. Harassment of Protestant groups is notable. In the south, notorious crime boss “Nam Cam,” whose reach had thoroughly compromised the Ho Chi Minh City Police Department, was executed in June 2004, following a highly publicized trial involving drugs, gambling, and bribery.<sup>5</sup> Labor strikes are also now prevalent in Vietnam, most recently at foreign-invested companies, such as Fujitsu and Mabuchi Motor, which, in early 2006, saw an estimated ten thousand Vietnamese workers strike.<sup>6</sup>

But undoubtedly the most worrisome development to Vietnam’s Communists has been the surge of dissident activity, highlighted in 2006 by the reform calls of “Bloc 8406,” a loose collection of reformers and dissidents—led by doctors, lawyers, teachers, and some clergy—who launched the organization and its “Manifesto on Freedom and Democracy for Vietnam” on April 8, 2006. Four months later, the Bloc publicly called for a phased agenda of competitive democratic elections across Vietnam, a new constitution, establishment of independent political parties, and release of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience.<sup>7</sup>

As Bloc 8406 activities surged in the buildup to Hanoi’s hosting of the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in November 2006, the government cracked down. Simultaneously, perhaps as a concession for desired U.S.-normalized trade relations, Hanoi also released other dissidents and informed Washington it would relax its preventative detention practices. In December 2006, the U.S. Congress voted for permanent normal trade relations with Vietnam.<sup>8</sup> Then, with World Trade Organization (WTO) membership confirmed by January 2007, Hanoi cracked down again in February and March, going after Bloc 8406 activists and others calling for freedom in Vietnam—including groups like the small Vietnam Progression Party. The incarcerated dissidents now face jail sentences of eight to twenty years if convicted of “anti-state” charges.<sup>9</sup>

The Communist Party’s handling of these Vietnamese dissidents has provoked human rights groups abroad and has hounded the brave individuals inside who speak out. SRV internal security activities prompt continuing difficulties with foreign governments and international organizations from which Vietnam receives or lobbies for aid. First labeled in September

2004 by Washington as a “country of particular concern,”<sup>10</sup> Vietnam’s officials seem resigned to foreign, principally American, criticism of their handling of internal dissent. I witnessed a discussion in Ho Chi Minh City in March 2005 as senior U.S. and Vietnamese diplomats addressed American concerns over Vietnam’s human rights record. A Vietnamese official responded: “We are moving toward a more universal interpretation of human rights. But each nation has its own norms and values. In Vietnam this can’t happen overnight. And we can’t risk disturbances. Our top priority remains political and social stability. So we cannot accept other political parties or individuals’ rights to bear arms. We can’t do that.”<sup>11</sup>

Vietnam’s decision-making remains dominated by a triumvirate of Party, bureaucracy, and the armed forces, although the current Party General Secretary, Nông Đức Mạnh (b. 1940), like Hu Jintao (b. 1942) in China and Kim Jong-il (b. 1942) in North Korea, was not one of the original revolutionary cadres. (Interestingly, college-educated Mạnh, who is a frequent critic of corruption, is of Tay ethnic origin and has not sought to dispel rumors that he might be an illegitimate son of Hồ Chí Minh, 1890–1969.) Three other principal Vietnamese leaders, all recently appointed, also count in the power structure: Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng (b. 1949), who replaced Phan Văn Khải (b. 1933); President Nguyễn Minh Triết (b. 1942), who replaced Trần Đức Lương (b. 1937); and Nguyễn Phú Trọng (b. 1944), Chairman of the National Assembly.<sup>12</sup>

Significant overlap exists in membership between Politburo members and serving cabinet ministers, and numerous senior Vietnamese military officers have also moved on to prominent political positions.<sup>13</sup> However, since the unsuccessful Party leadership of former General Lê Khả Phiêu (b. 1931), whose 1977–2001 tenure was marked by political bickering, charges of corruption, and repeated zigzags on economic reform, formal military membership in the upper reaches of Vietnam’s governing elite has been reduced.<sup>14</sup>

As Vietnamese society has changed and diversified, the Party has witnessed the rise of civic and professional associations, groups which fill gaps between the Party and the object of its persistent attention: the population. These associations focus on issues such as social welfare, street children, HIV/AIDS, community affairs, and women’s rights. Hanoi was slower to accept these interest groups than was Saigon (renamed Ho Chi Minh City in 1976). Today the countrywide trend continues, with a slowly growing spread of civic and interest groups that the Party, always zealous to impose order, attempts to control.<sup>15</sup> The Party remains entrenched, however, in other state institutions and mass organizations like the Confederation of Trade Unions and the Vietnam Fatherland Front, the VCP recruitment organ. Nevertheless, Vietnam’s economic transformation over the last fifteen years has compelled important changes in the Party, as vigorous debates continue between the economic modernists and the national security traditionalists.

The youth issue in Vietnam also presents another challenge for the VCP, as it has for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): Young Vietnamese do not seem particularly interested in becoming communists. Total VCP membership is about two million, but possibly only 5 percent of Vietnamese in their twenties apply for Party membership. Buying into the “vision” of the still senior-dominated Party or the Vietnam Fatherland Front is not rampant. Indeed, a 2000 poll in Vietnam showed that 90 percent of Ho Chi Minh City youths considered Microsoft founder Bill Gates as their “role model,” followed by Ho Chi Minh himself, at 39 percent.<sup>16</sup> In China, the same sort of problem prompted the CCP leadership actively to court entrepreneurs and youth.<sup>17</sup>

Although Vietnamese society has diversified and liberalized, and the Party has partially relaxed, still no active alternative to the VCP is permitted. Vietnam remains a one-party state: All senior government positions, civilian and military, are filled by Party members. The government also prohibits independent legal, labor, and social organizations.<sup>18</sup> Vietnamese citizens cannot change their form of government, and there is an oppressive intrusion of the security organs, led by the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), into people’s lives. As in other Communist regimes, Vietnam’s MPS operates a system of household registration and block wardens to monitor people, but the system’s effectiveness clearly varies by locality. Vietnamese prisons are harsh and offer only minimal medical care.

Freedom of press, speech, assembly, and association in Vietnam are significantly restricted. Television is a dominant communication medium in Vietnam, and Vietnamese Television broadcasts from Hanoi to the entire country. Provincial television programming is also subject to Party approval. Still, some foreign channels, like CNN, can be accessed in international hotels via cable services.<sup>19</sup> Another interesting variation on, or relaxation of, censorship is to see paperback novels—in English or French—by notable Vietnamese dissidents or once-banned authors on sale in Saigon. I have in mind Dương Thu Hương (b. 1947), *Paradise of the Blind* and *Novel Without A Name*; Bảo Ninh (b. 1952), *The Sorrows of War*; and Le Ly Hayslip (b. 1949), *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* and *Child of War, Woman of Peace*.

Vietnam’s judiciary is not independent, the courts being leveraged by the Party; and courts can sentence citizens up to five years of “administrative detention” after completion of their original sentences—standard procedure, as well, in other Communist-ruled countries. Few lawyers practice in Vietnam, and trial procedures are rudimentary. A growing backlog of unsettled civil lawsuits in Vietnam has essentially overwhelmed the Ministry of Justice.<sup>20</sup> Government organs routinely open and censor targeted individuals’ mail; and they likewise monitor telephones, faxes, and computers.<sup>21</sup>

So far, only a few non-Party candidates have been permitted to compete for elections in Vietnam at any level (a contrast to China, where numerous independent candidates have run and won at the village level). Vietnam's National Assembly, as the highest organ of state power, has an increasing voice on numerous issues. At times, the government-controlled media shows fortitude on issues like corruption; but the National Assembly and the media, like most other elements in Vietnam, serve primarily to legitimate the power and policies of the regime.<sup>22</sup> Party controls even appear in higher education, where officials channel admissions to university openings.<sup>23</sup> I believe the VCP exerts more penetration and control of Vietnamese society than does the Communist Party in China, a country with a population seventeen times larger than Vietnam's.

### **External Security:**

#### **The Peculiarities & the Business of Vietnam's Defense**

Despite the VCP's tendency to link the country's internal difficulties to external mischief, the SRV does objectively have some valid external security concerns, although Hanoi's methods of dealing with them can seem curious and are usually inefficient. Vietnam's armed forces, especially the army, remain the largest in Southeast Asia—currently about 455,000 troops.<sup>24</sup> The military provides a visible way of employing young men, although the force structure is down from nearly one million troops when Vietnam finally exited Cambodia in 1989, having lost some fifty thousand men during the exhausting, eleven-year occupation to rid Cambodia of Pol Pot (1975–98). The SRV's defense budget, as a percentage of GDP, is the largest in Southeast Asia.<sup>25</sup>

However, the trend in reductions of regular active-duty Vietnamese troops continues, with the MOD placing new emphasis on local forces to include border guards, part-time militia, self-defense forces, and badly needed maritime police.<sup>26</sup> Hanoi has also indirectly identified some of these units as involved in economic enterprises. My own interviews with senior Vietnamese officers indicate that significant numbers of educated or otherwise skilled military personnel are assigned to commercial operations in state-owned enterprises (SOEs).<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, Vietnamese Army doctrine still reflects that of a developing country with insecure borders ruled by Communist authority. Thus the army proclaims missions of "People's War," "Protection of the Fatherland," and "Development."<sup>28</sup> The People's Army of Vietnam, originally established by Hồ Chí Minh and Võ Nguyên Giáp (b. 1911) as the Party's armed propaganda team, ranks in influence just behind the Party and the state bureaucracies. And, as in China, Vietnamese air force and naval personnel come under Army dominance, as does Vietnam's Air Defense Force, a different unit from the air force, which has more manpower than the air force and navy combined.

Hanoi is slowly modernizing Vietnam's armed forces, given much of the aging Soviet equipment with which the SRV is saddled, including antiquated jet fighters and huge numbers of main battle tanks (MBTs)—over 1,300, or over twice the number of MBTs in the rest of Southeast Asia. Then again, Hanoi has never really taken its eye off China, and SRV armor is undoubtedly Hanoi's "equalizer" against Chinese manpower. Vietnam's Navy is woefully inadequate, given the country's nearly 2,400 kilometers of coastline, episodes of smuggling and piracy, and the large volume of seaborne trade the SRV experiences. The Russians left Cam Ranh Bay in 2002, unwilling to surrender the reported \$300 million annual rent the Vietnamese demanded, but Moscow was giving up its major Pacific role anyway. As Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov (b. 1953) commented in April 2003: "As for Cam Ranh Bay, in the past fifteen years everything that could be stolen there was stolen and the rest broke down. The base was actually used for refueling our ships but they called at it only two or three times in the past ten years."<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, in something of a new look between Moscow and Hanoi, a deal is underway for purchase of more surplus Russian and Czech SU-22 aircraft, with follow-on upgrades; and the Vietnamese are also receiving delivery of twelve SU-27 and four SU-30 aircraft.<sup>30</sup> Both Finland and Poland are also apparently resupplying Vietnam. The Finns are sloughing off a fleet of forty-year-old Soviet T-54 and T-55 MBTs, and the Poles have offered Vietnam used T-72 tanks as well as new maritime surveillance aircraft. In 2005 Vietnam was to have taken delivery of twelve Russian-built SA-10c air defense systems.<sup>31</sup> Vietnam also is strengthening its military ties with India—advice on countering guerilla warfare in return for maintenance of SRV MiG fighters—an interesting, and implicitly anti-Chinese, hedging move.

Finally, as suggested earlier, one of the most striking aspects of Vietnam's military is how deeply embedded it is in business operations through SOEs—construction, manufacturing, mining, pharmaceuticals, gambling, hotels, and restaurants: the same sort of approach as China's People's Liberation Army. Some of Vietnam's military construction projects are on the country's borders and in highland areas where security is indeed problematic, serious poverty exists, and de facto martial law operates.<sup>32</sup> I encountered estimates, but cannot confirm, that possibly up to 40 percent of the budget of the Vietnamese armed forces is earned through these SOEs, which are run by selected officers and senior non-commissioned officers.<sup>33</sup> A particularly interesting example involved a visit to "Company No. 32," an SOE in Ho Chi Minh City that manufactures shoes, uniforms, and luggage for both the MOD and for foreign export. A dozen Vietnamese army officers from major to senior colonel greeted us in a conference room and explained in detail how their SOE worked. Twenty military officers supervise

the production of nearly 5,000 workers (mostly women) making the goods. Financial incentives are available for both the officers (“bonuses for efficiency”) and for the workers at Company No. 32. How were officers recruited into Company 32? (“One can volunteer or the MOD can assign an officer here.”) What about a loss of military professionalism after years in an SOE? (“There has been a lot of discussion on this . . . but we have well-educated officers here with skills unrelated to military requirements.”)<sup>34</sup>

Vietnamese generals with whom I have talked acknowledge the professional risks of an army in business; they are aware of the serious corruption that has infected the Indonesian, Thai, and Chinese armed forces. But Vietnamese commanders, some of whom obviously profit personally from these state enterprises, seem content at this point—and not concerned in public—about the loss of professionalism that accompanies Asia’s “business soldiers.” This situation is striking, given Communist Vietnam’s previous military defeats of the French, Saigon’s American-assisted forces, and the Chinese. Undoubtedly, the primary reason is simply low pay: Vietnamese military salaries are not high, and the opportunities to make money in off-budget operations are too enticing. And, after all, in a country whose GDP is growing at 8 percent, with a stock market that rocketed 145 percent in 2006 and was up another 40 percent by April 2007, soldiers naturally have jumped into the speculative rush.<sup>35</sup>

### **Diplomacy: Dealing with Beijing & Washington**

Despite globalization, Vietnam’s improving relations with the United States, the SRV’s emergence as a robust trading nation, and SRV diplomats’ repeated trumpeting of diversification and “multidirectionality” in foreign policy,<sup>36</sup> Vietnam cannot escape geography or history. Thus China, its huge presence next to—and its difficult history with—the Vietnamese, is always evident in Hanoi’s security planning and diplomatic calculations. Streets and boulevards in Vietnam are named for guerrilla fighters and legendary commanders who fought Chinese invaders over the centuries. After the two countries fought again in 1979, it took until 1991 to renormalize diplomatic relations. Today, on the surface, the situation is fine: The two Communist parties have “cordial relations”; long-negotiated land–border arrangements were finalized in December 1999; and a Tonkin Gulf demarcation was signed in December 2000. But Vietnamese children are still taught about China’s historic invasions and pacification campaigns, and only twenty-eight years have passed since China’s most recent incursion—which the Vietnamese repelled with some help from Chinese military miscalculations (and the limited, “teach-them-a-lesson” goals of Deng Xiaoping, 1904–97).

The more recent pattern of dispute resolution between China and Vietnam shows a relatively sophisticated and patient approach by both sides,

although the Chinese have evidently required preliminary diplomatic “deference” from Hanoi before sitting down with SRV officials.<sup>37</sup> Sino–Viet dispute resolution has evolved through stages: the late 1978 Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia and China’s counter-invasion of northern Vietnam in early 1979; Vietnam’s gradual exhaustion in Cambodia and the army’s 1989 exit; China’s eventual softening toward the Vietnamese and their client in Phnom Penh, Hun Sen (b. 1951); the sustained negotiations on territorial disputes including the Paracel and Spratly archipelagoes; and, finally, the discussions over other water and continental shelf claims in the South China Sea and the Tonkin Gulf. These later disputes have come under an extensive hierarchy of negotiations and discussions, and the results have been impressive,<sup>38</sup> despite persistent disagreement over final sovereignty claims on portions of the Spratly and Paracel archipelagoes and the surrounding sea beds,<sup>39</sup> as well as the incident of January 2005, where nine Vietnamese—called “fisherman” by Hanoi but “pirates” by China—died in a clash with Chinese security forces in the Gulf of Tonkin.<sup>40</sup>

Putting a high-level diplomatic stamp on the broader negotiations, and showcasing more recent agreements between Hanoi and Beijing, were two important state visits by former SRV President Trần Đức Lương to Beijing in July 2005 and a reciprocal visit by President Hu Jintao of China to Hanoi in November 2005. The Lương visit was essentially a trade mission, with Chinese and Vietnamese businesspeople signing fourteen deals totaling slightly over US\$1 billion. To the extent that it can be monetized, Viet–Chinese trade may now be worth almost US\$10 billion annually,<sup>41</sup> with China sending machinery, telecommunications equipment, pharmaceuticals, fertilizer, and vehicles, and the Vietnamese exporting crude oil, coal, coffee, fish, and fruits and vegetables to China.<sup>42</sup> A road-and-rail economic corridor is planned to revitalize the Kunming–Hanoi–Haiphong route as an outlet for southwestern Chinese trade.<sup>43</sup>

Chinese President Hu’s November 2005 visit to Vietnam emphasized joint exploration for offshore oil and gas. The lead Chinese offshore oil and gas producer, the China National Offshore Oil Corporation, is being paired with a major Vietnamese oil firm to explore oil and gas in the Beibu Bay.<sup>44</sup> Thus economic interdependence, at least for now, seems to have eclipsed the historic problems and suspicion between China and Vietnam. And Hanoi publicly supports Beijing’s “one-China” policy on Taiwan.<sup>45</sup> But one wonders how long the cordiality will last once the Chinese push real naval power down into the South China Sea and close to Vietnam’s offshore oil claims.<sup>46</sup>

Relations between Hanoi and Washington, Vietnam’s next-most important foreign policy challenge after China, continue in what U.S. diplomats call a “formative” stage. Meeting with a Vietnamese general in February 2006, I was told: “Our Party directs us to overcome the past, so we see Americans as friends. We appreciate U.S. presidents coming to Vietnam, as

we do U.S. veterans returning here.”<sup>47</sup> The year 2005 marked the tenth anniversary of the normalization of relations and the fifth anniversary of the U.S.–SRV Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA). Nearly 1.5 million Vietnamese-Americans have become U.S. citizens. Former South Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ (b. 1930) visited the SRV on a January 2004 goodwill trip; and U.S.–Viet cooperation continues on POW and MIA issues. Nearly 2,500 Vietnamese are studying in the U.S.; and about one hundred NGOs have offices in Vietnam.<sup>48</sup>

However, the year 2005 was also the thirtieth anniversary of Saigon’s fall, the sixtieth anniversary of Ho Chi Minh’s declaration of independence from France, and the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Indochinese Communist Party; so U.S.–SRV relations, despite pragmatism on both sides, still show definite sensitivities.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, SRV–U.S. trade, spurred by the BTA, grew nearly 10 percent in 2004, reaching \$6.5 billion (with a nearly \$4 billion U.S. deficit). The United States now purchases some 20 percent of Vietnam’s exports,<sup>50</sup> despite the fact that U.S.-organized labor has charged Vietnam with dumping low-cost goods, especially seafood, on the American market.<sup>51</sup> Both sides saw the BTA providing valuable experience for Vietnam as Hanoi pushed for WTO admission, arguing that the document was crafted “on the basis of WTO principles and regulations,” with key contents focused on trade, intellectual properties, and the service sector.<sup>52</sup> Specifically, Hanoi agreed to reduce tariffs and non-tariff barriers, ease restrictions on services such as telecommunications and banking, and provide better protection for foreign direct investment.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the June 2007 visit to Washington, D.C., by Vietnamese President Nguyễn Minh Triết revealed continuing differences between the two governments on whether human rights or trade should be at the center of U.S.–SRV relations.<sup>54</sup>

U.S.–SRV military-to-military relations are not close, although several American navy ships have visited Vietnam, and more such visits may occur.<sup>55</sup> So far, Washington provides no economic or training assistance to Vietnam’s armed forces, although Vietnamese officials have suggested sending officers to U.S. military schools now that an international military education and training agreement has been reached. Vietnamese officers attend courses at the Asia–Pacific Center for Security Studies in Honolulu, a facility of the U.S. Department of Defense; and delegates from two American war colleges have visited Vietnam. However, any U.S. notion of drawing Vietnam into some kind of U.S.-sponsored China “containment” arrangement seems very unlikely, given Hanoi’s experiences with both the Americans and the Chinese. Then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s early June 2006 visit to Vietnam ended with carefully muted statements regarding future U.S.–SRV military relations.<sup>56</sup> And as an SRV MOD white paper stated: “Vietnam consistently advocates neither joining any military alli-

ance nor giving any foreign countries permission to have military bases in Vietnam. . . . Vietnam will not be embroiled in any arms race but needs to build national defense might [that is] strong enough for self defense.”<sup>57</sup>

The mixed and evolving nature of U.S.–Vietnamese relations and the challenge of managing differences without damaging the overall relationship was addressed by the current U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, Michael Marine, in October 2005: “In fact—and to some extent counter-intuitively—the closer the two countries become and the broader their relationship is, the greater the number of areas in which contention can arise. I think this is where the United States and Vietnam now are, but it’s not something we should seek to change.”<sup>58</sup>

Thus we see the Socialist Republic of Vietnam’s engagement with two critical great powers. Presently that engagement, and the SRV’s overall trade thrust, is based largely on economics, the inevitable concession to the multifaceted impacts of “globalization.” Vietnam’s thrust into the global economy, while the Party continues to monitor and police the population, is prompting the emergence of a new kind of Vietnamese elite: the entrepreneur–official. But public pressure for an equivalent political liberalization in Vietnam continues to meet resistance by the Communist Party oligarchy. The “new Vietnamese citizen,” like his or her emerging Chinese counterpart, is eventually going to dispense with much of the revolutionary bric-a-brac of Communism—but it will be with a wink and a nod rather than a through a formal burial. Although Marxism is steadily dying in Vietnam, Vietnam’s own form of Leninism, conditioned by the deep authoritarian traditions in that country’s difficult history, will persist for years to come.

## Notes

*The views presented in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily constitute the views of the U.S. Air Force, the Department of Defense, or any other U.S. Government agency.*

<sup>1</sup>Ministry of Defense, *Vietnam’s National Defense in the Early Years of the 21st Century* (Hanoi: SRV Ministry of Defense, 2004), 11–12.

<sup>2</sup>Details on Hanoi’s collectivization effort after capturing Saigon in 1975—and the subsequent ruining of the South’s economy and extinguishing of its political freedoms—are in Lawrence E. Grinter, “Vietnam’s Thrust into Globalization: *Doi Moi*’s Long Road,” *Asian Affairs* 33, no. 3 (2006): 151–54.

<sup>3</sup>See Barbara Crosette, “Ailing Southeast Asia: A Reckoning Looms,” *World Policy Journal* 23, no. 3 (2006): 26. See also Nguyen-Xuan Nghia, “Banking Reform in Vietnam,” in *The Vietnamese Economy and Its Transformation to a Market System*, ed. William T. Alpert (London: M. E. Sharpe, 2005), 200–214.

<sup>4</sup>The release of a prominent Vietnamese Baptist minister, the Reverend Than Van Truong, returned to his family on September 17, 2005, illustrated Vietnamese authori-

ties' worries about religion. A former Vietnamese army officer, Truong was first arrested in May 2003 when he was held without charges for nine months after distributing Bibles. He was rearrested in June 2004, diagnosed as "delusional" for believing in God, and sent to a mental hospital. See "Religious Groups Vexed in Vietnam," ZENIT.org International News Agency, September 24, 2005.

<sup>5</sup>Jane's Sentinel, "Southeast Asia," Issue 20-2007 (London: Jane's Information Group, 2007), 727.

<sup>6</sup>Van Bao, "Thousands Go on Strike in Dong Nai," *Saigon Times Daily*, March 3, 2006.

<sup>7</sup>The Manifesto cites Hồ Chí Minh's reference to the U.S. Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration on Human and Civil Rights (1791), stating that these universal freedoms have been "mercilessly repressed" in Vietnam, since the VCP has rejected all political competition, usurped the people's voices, and has not permitted a single free election in all the time it has held power. Full text of the Manifesto is available at [http://hrw.org/pub/2006/manifesto\\_040606.pdf](http://hrw.org/pub/2006/manifesto_040606.pdf) (accessed July 1, 2007).

<sup>8</sup>Matt Steinglass, "Vietnam's New Dissidents Thrive via Internet: Blogs, Chats, Fuel Surge in Efforts to Push Democracy," *Boston Globe*, October 29, 2006; Shawn W. Crispin, "Bush Strikes a 'Grand Bargain' with Vietnam," *Asia Times Online*, November 16, 2006; and Asia Pulse/VNA, "A New Era in US-Vietnam Relations," *Asia Times Online*, December 14, 2006.

<sup>9</sup>Shawn W. Crispin, "Hanoi's Doublecross on Democracy," *Asia Times Online*, March 30, 2007.

<sup>10</sup>The U.S. State Department removed Vietnam from its "concern" list just prior to the mid-November 2006 APEC summit and President Bush's visit to Hanoi.

<sup>11</sup>A Vietnamese diplomat in Hanoi stated the following when addressing media coverage of SRV human rights problems: "Journalists can find good and bad here. But they need to be fair to us. We want mutual understanding" (March 3, 2005). The MOD states it as follows: "Broadening democracy must go hand in hand with instilling into the people the sense of preserving social disciplines and law abiding together with the sense of responsibility towards the cause of national defense." Ministry of Defense, *Vietnam's National Defense*, 21.

<sup>12</sup>Note that Nguyễn is the most common Vietnamese surname: these three Nguyễns are not necessarily immediately related.

<sup>13</sup>Economist, "Country Profile: Vietnam 2005," *Economist Intelligence Unit* (2005), 11.

<sup>14</sup>See Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnam in 2001: The Ninth Party Congress and After," *Asian Survey* 42, no. 1 (2002): 81–89.

<sup>15</sup>Joerg Wischermann, "Vietnam in the Era of *Doi Moi*: Issue-Oriented Organizations and Their Relationship to the Government," *Asian Survey* 43, no. 6 (2003): 867–89.

<sup>16</sup>Long S. Le, "Vietnam's Generational Split," *Asia Times Online*, June 23, 2007.

<sup>17</sup>The core of former Chinese President Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents" was the recruiting of rich entrepreneurs who emerged during Jiang's presidency.

<sup>18</sup>See U.S. State Department, "Vietnam: Country Report on Human Rights Practices" (February 28, 2005), 2, 5.

<sup>19</sup>BBC News, "Country Profile: Vietnam," [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/country\\_profiles/1243338.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/country_profiles/1243338.stm) (accessed July 1, 2007).

<sup>20</sup>Economist, "Country Profile: Vietnam 2005," 10.

<sup>21</sup>These activities should be familiar to anyone who has tracked VCP practices over the years. See, for example, Lawrence E. Grinter, "Indochina's Slow Opening to the Future," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 9, no. 2 (1997): 191–208, 204–5.

<sup>22</sup>Control over candidacies to the National Assembly is exercised through the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF), described by Adam Fforde as a "Leninist body . . . which

groups mass organizations . . . to prevent development of independent political representation.” Adam Fforde, “Vietnam in 2004: Popular Authority Seeking Power?” *Asian Survey* 45, no. 1 (2005): 146–52, 149. The chairman of the Việt Tân argues that the independent candidates allowed to run for the May 2007 National Assembly elections were all hand picked by the VCP. See Diem H. Do, “Fight for the Right to Choose in Vietnam,” *Asia Times Online*, May 23, 2007.

<sup>23</sup>Author’s discussions at U.S. Embassy in Hanoi, March 3, 2005.

<sup>24</sup>See International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 2007* (London: IISS/Oxford University Press, 2007), 377–79.

<sup>25</sup>The SRV’s defense budget stood at 7.45 percent of Vietnam’s GDP in 2003. See Jane’s Sentinel, “Southeast Asia,” 767.

<sup>26</sup>See Pham Van Tra, “Vietnam: Building and Sustaining People’s Defense,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 36 (2005): 97–101, 99–100. See also Ministry of Defense, *Vietnam’s National Defense*, 52–59.

<sup>27</sup>Ministry of Defense, *Vietnam’s National Defense*, 73, describes sixteen “defense economic zones” in which units of the army have created “green belts” for the country, “making contribution to socio-economic development, eliminating hunger and reducing poverty, maintaining political stability and security in those areas.”

<sup>28</sup>Author’s discussions at the Institute of Military Strategy, Ministry of Defense, Hanoi (March 3, 2005), and at the Air and Air Defense Academy, Son Tay (February 27, 2006). Flood disaster clean-ups and flood prevention draw Vietnamese armed forces efforts during the monsoon season. And in his article in this issue of the *SERAS* (pp. 119–36), Vincent Wei-cheng Wang describes “People’s War” as the primary military doctrine of China’s People’s Liberation Army from 1978 to 1985.

<sup>29</sup>As cited in Dale R. Herspring, “Vladimir Putin and Military Reform in Russia,” *European Security* 14, no. 1 (2005): 137–55, 142.

<sup>30</sup>International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 2006* (London: IISS/Oxford University Press, 2006), 298; and “Vietnam,” *Defense and Foreign Affairs Handbook*, 16th ed. (Alexandria, VA: International Strategic Studies Association, 2006), 2255.

<sup>31</sup>Tim Glogan, “Vietnam to Buy Soviet-era Tanks from Finland,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly* 42, no. 6 (2005): 21; and Grzegorz Holdanowicz, “Vietnam’s \$150m Deal with Poland,” *Janes Defence Weekly* 42, no. 9 (2005): 16. See also “Country Briefing: Vietnam,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly* 43, no. 1 (2006): 24; Christian Le Miere, ed., *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment: Southeast Asia* 16 (Surrey, England: Jane’s Information Group, 2005), 576; “Vietnam,” 2255; and Federico Bordonaro, “Russia’s New Vietnam Courtship,” *Asia Times Online*, September 30, 2006.

<sup>32</sup>Note the similarities to Western China, where the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) occupies Tibet, and where the People’s Action Police—a spin-off of the PLA—operates in Xinjiang.

<sup>33</sup>Private communication. Also, as early as 1998, the Vietnamese military establishment was reported to be in nearly sixty joint business ventures with foreign firms. Over two hundred businesses controlled by the Vietnamese armed forces were expected to raise some US\$600 million, presumably all as subsidies to the armed forces. “Vietnam,” 2254.

<sup>34</sup>Author’s visit to Company No. 32, Ho Chi Minh City, March 3, 2006.

<sup>35</sup>Karl D. John, “Shares on a Tear in Vietnam,” *Asia Times Online*, April 19, 2007.

<sup>36</sup>Explaining the U.S. National Security Council process and the Chinese Leading Groups approach to a Vietnamese deputy foreign minister and country director in Hanoi, I asked if something similar characterized SRV foreign policy decision-making. The response was negative: “We have a less formal approach. We work out the issues

among the various ministries, then they go to a deputy prime minister for foreign affairs for reconciliation and decision.”

<sup>37</sup>Alexander L. Vuving, “Strategy and Evolution of Vietnam’s China Policy: A Changing Mixture of Pathways,” *Asian Survey* 46, no. 6 (2006): 805–24, 808–9.

<sup>38</sup>Ramses Amer, “Assessing Sino-Vietnamese Relations through the Management of Contentious Issues,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 26, no. 2 (2004): 320–45. See also Elizabeth Economy, “China’s Rise in Southeast Asia: Implications for the United States,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 14, no. 44 (2005): 409–25, 417.

<sup>39</sup>Economist, “Country Profile: Vietnam 2005,” 14.

<sup>40</sup>Jane’s Sentinel, “Southeast Asia,” 758.

<sup>41</sup>See Andrew Symon, “China, Vietnam Spar over Gas,” *Asia Times Online*, May 1, 2007.

<sup>42</sup>Asia Pulse/VNA, “China, Vietnam Find Love,” *Asia Times Online*, July 21, 2005.

<sup>43</sup>Economist, “Country Profile: Vietnam 2005,” 8.

<sup>44</sup>Asia Pulse/XIC, “Hu Calls for Closer Vietnam/China Links,” *Asia Times Online*, November 3, 2005.

<sup>45</sup>See, for example, the Foreign Ministry statement of March 3, 2006, in *Viet Nam News*, March 4, 2006.

<sup>46</sup>Beijing recently contested a new Hanoi-tendered, British Petroleum–led, US\$2 billion natural gas venture near the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. The contested project, led by BP in partnership with PetroVietnam and with additional interests by (U.S.) ConocoPhillips and the Korea National Oil Corporation, has come under negotiation within the framework of the ASEAN “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea.” See Symon, “China, Vietnam Spar.”

<sup>47</sup>Author’s interview with Maj. Gen. Binh Van Bong, Son Tay, February 27, 2006.

<sup>48</sup>U.S. Consulate data, Ho Chi Minh City.

<sup>49</sup>A recurring issue voiced by the Vietnamese, both officially and by private interest groups, is the thousands of Vietnamese who claim injury from Agent Orange, a dioxin containing defoliant that U.S. forces sprayed on Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian jungles during the Second Indochina War. See Ngoc Nguyen and Aron Glantz, “Agent Orange Victims Fight Back,” *Asian Times Online*, March 21, 2006.

<sup>50</sup>U.S. Embassy data, Hanoi.

<sup>51</sup>Washington has periodically taken measures against Vietnamese seafood and garment exports. Economist, “Country Profile, Vietnam 2005,” 13.

<sup>52</sup>Vo Tri Thanh, “Vietnam’s Trade Liberalization and International Economic Integration: Evolution, Problems, and Challenges,” *ASEAN Economic Bulletin* 22, no. 1 (2005): 75–91, 82.

<sup>53</sup>Mark Manyin, “Vietnam: Focused Domestically, Adrift Internationally,” in *Asian Security Handbook: Terrorism and the New Security Environment*, 3rd ed., ed. William A. Carpenter and David G. Wieneck (London: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), 307.

<sup>54</sup>John E. Carey, “Two Sides to Triet’s US Visit,” *Asia Times Online*, June 27, 2007.

<sup>55</sup>Margie Mason, “U.S. Navy Warship Visits Vietnam,” *U.S. Pacific Command News*, March 29, 2005. See <http://131.84.1.218/articles/articles2005/050330story4.shtml>.

<sup>56</sup>See Jim Lobe, “Pentagon Woos Vietnam,” *Asia Times Online*, July 19, 2003. For the carefully expressed rebuttal during Secretary Rumsfeld’s visit, see Bill Hayden, “Rumsfeld in Vietnam as Ties Warm,” *BBC News*, June 4, 2006.

<sup>57</sup>Ministry of Defense, *Vietnam’s National Defense*, 14.

<sup>58</sup>Ambassador Marine to Los Angeles World Affairs Council, as quoted in Grant McCool, “Vietnam at WTO’s Doorstep,” *Asia Times Online*, January 12, 2006.