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The New Vietnamese Vocabulary for Foreign and Defense Relations

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In the last decade, the Foreign and Defense Ministries in Vietnam have sought to develop more effective organizations and capable leadership, incorporating more complex information into the way these organizations think about the world and make decisions regarding policies and strategic direction. Increasingly energetic inquiry and the freer flow of information brought about as a result of globalization have changed Vietnam's approach to issues and problems, and made Vietnamese policy makers receptive to new ideas such as capacity building. What has begun to emerge is an entirely new strategic vocabulary.

Vietnamese officials started using the term "strategic partnership" with more precise meaning and employing more exacting definitions of foreign and defense relationships in late 2009/early 2010. This was about the same time as the publication of Vietnam's third Defense White Paper and also during the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's tenure as chair of ASEAN in 2010. Terms such as "transparency" were increasingly utilized in discourses about regional defense cooperation as evidenced by the public accounts of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+) dialogues. However, Vietnamese officials have taken these words more to heart and are employing them internally, within their own bureaucracies, rather than just externally, where the main purpose of this vocabulary is usually to say the right things at the right time for international consumption.

Senior officials sought to articulate the different categories of Vietnam's external relationships in public speeches and statements beginning in late 2010. Senior diplomatic and defense officials talked in terms that emphasized the intangible requirements for mutually beneficial bilateral and multilateral relationships including increased levels of reciprocity and trust. In addition, they sought to shape increasingly operational definitions of strategic cooperation and strategic dialogue, all of which suggested a much more thoughtful understanding of the fundamentals of contemporary foreign and defense relations and policies.

This change is also evident in the Political Report of the 11th Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in January 2011 that contained a fundamental change in terminology from "international economic integration" to "international integration" (*Hội nhập quốc tế*). This new term "international integration" recognized the links that pervaded the political-social-economic and military challenges that almost all governments face today. As one mid-level policy analyst involved in the process confided, this change represented a compromise over language between "conservatives" and "liberals." The liberals had wrung a concession from conservatives who wanted to make certain that the term *Diễn Biến Hòa Bình* (Peaceful Transformation—the bumper sticker representing the threat perceived to stability posed by foreign interests) was utilized in the text a sufficient number of times. In return for this inclusion, liberals were able to integrate a section into the Political Report that described broader "linkages" between economics, defense, security, and domestic social policy.

Lewis M. Stern, former Director for Southeast Asia in the Office of the Secretary of Defense 2002 - 2008, explains that "Decision-makers in Hanoi and Washington now need to determine what it will take to move the relationship from the status of a 'comprehensive partnership' conferred during President Truong Tan Sang's 2013 visit to a new 'strategic partnership.'"

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Since then, the Vietnamese decision-making bureaucracy has been trying to add further substance to the term of international integration. Ministerial-level institutes were drawn into the effort to shape a concept that sought to define a “roadmap” to integration for the 2011-2020 time frame, and approached Western analysts and think tanks for analytical perspectives on the subject. Vietnamese strategic thinkers have also wrestled with new ways of thinking about their core missions, and ways to transform sluggish, decision-adverse bureaucracies into nimble, adaptable, flexible institutions capable of quickly integrating new ideas. Strategic thinkers have recognized that modern governments need to be able to rapidly change course, switch perspectives, and recognize unforeseen possibilities and unanticipated dimensions of an issue as they move forward. Therefore, it is imperative that such systems are stocked with capable analysts, decisive managers, and well-informed leaders.

Vietnam already has a head start in this area. Many young Vietnamese military officers and foreign policy officials represent a unique combination of personal capabilities, including a willingness to address issues directly, along with a capacity to conduct earnest and strategic dialogue with foreign friends and partners. Some have degrees in international relations from prestigious foreign schools and many have been in the Defense or the Foreign Ministry for around ten years, serving as desk officers in Vietnamese embassies in the West during the late 1990s, and have now returned home to policy level assignments. These young and well-educated officials represent an emergent human capital of mid-level foreign policy and defense/security bureaucrat with keen strategic talents and analytical acuity.

The inclusion of disaster relief and humanitarian assistance as an element of practical bilateral and regional cooperation in Vietnam’s relations with new friends and strategic partners went a long way toward pressing systems to think flexibly about their hidebound cultures and narrow ways of defining mandates. So too did the need to effectively confront terrorism with an “all of government” response and the imperative for regional cooperation on health challenges such as pandemics and food security issues. Establishing predictable, institutionalized means of confronting this multitude of challenges across ministries in a public way was a key step toward an integrated approach. Integration also required a new way of thinking about international organizations, regional blocs, strategic dialogues and confidence building opportunities.

Vietnamese analysts seemed to believe that by adding the term “international integration” (*Hội nhập quốc tế*) to the Political Report, more room had been created in which to promote relations with the outside world. To young Vietnamese intellectuals, this phrase carried an importance similar to the adoption of the term “renovation” to describe the serious reforms institutionalized in the mid- and late-1980s. These Vietnamese thinkers recognized that the concept was a “work in progress” and that over time the definition would evolve in a manner that would present more options for reshaping Vietnam’s foreign relations and defense policy.

US-Vietnam defense relations have begun to reflect some of these changes. Decision-makers in Hanoi and Washington now need to determine what it will take to move the relationship from the status of a “comprehensive partnership” conferred during President Truong Tan Sang’s 2013 visit to a new “strategic partnership.” The bilateral defense relationship has increasingly begun to focus on building capabilities in specialized areas such as peacekeeping and expanded areas of practical bilateral cooperation such as disaster relief exercises. This, and the effort to define a basis for strategic cooperation, will drive the two defense establishments closer to the point when they will have to turn attention to the manner in which defense reform, professional military education, standards of conduct, and civil-military relations become variables in the development of both the bilateral defense relationship and Vietnam’s regional interaction with friends and neighbors.

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