

Vietnam's Contextual Perspective on National Interests

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Abstract—This paper investigates the primary Documents of Vietnamese Communist Party and Vietnamese government's experiences in implementing the Doi Moi (renovation) under the impact of the world's constantly changing context. From there, it shows that in each stage and context, Vietnam has adjusted its perspective to adapt to new situation. The paper has analyzed the substance, elements that lay impacts on the concept and the process of implementation to ensure national interests in the international relations, as well as the implementation to ensure the maximization of Vietnam's national interests; thus, the concrete recommendations for Vietnam have been made in ensuring the highest national interests in the new context.

Keywords—national interests, new context, Vietnam's foreign policy

I. INTRODUCTION

The national interest is a category that has been mentioned extensively in the process of planning and implementing the policy on foreign relations of countries in the world. The researchers of international relations have introduced a variety of different concepts of national interests¹. However, most researchers agree that *the national interests are the value of a responsible subject which determines by himself the interests of his country – nation*. Therefore, *this is a concept of highly generalized character, comprising the vital requirements of that country; it is self-defense, independence, territorial integrity, military security, and prosperity* [1]. In March 1948, British Prime Minister Henry Palmerston made a classic statement on the national interests at the British House of Commons: “We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual which we are obliged to obey.” [2].

II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. The Situation of Ensuring National Interests of Vietnam before the Doi Moi (Renovation) Period

After the victory of the resistance war against the US to save the country in the spring of 1975, a new era opened for the Vietnamese people – peace, independence, unity – the whole country transitioned towards socialism. The Victory contributed to enhancing Vietnam's prestige and position in the international theatre. Based on the favorable international situation for Vietnam after the war, the Communist Party of Vietnam and Vietnam's government expanded foreign relations and economic cooperation with foreign countries to

promote the attraction of capital and technical equipment to heal the wounds of war and rebuild the country. A unified Vietnam with more than 50 million people, with the potential for economic development, became a new and important factor in Southeast Asia, a partner that many countries around the world need to take into account in the international system. From 1975–1977, Vietnam established diplomatic relations with 23 countries. However, the post-war recovery and national construction process had not been underway for long, and Vietnam was facing new serious challenges in international relations. Relations between Vietnam and neighboring countries sharing the same border appeared difficulties and increasingly complicated direction. Hostile forces inside and outside the region coordinated to sabotage Vietnam with a policy of siege and embargo.

In that context, to protect the Fatherland and ensure the highest national interests, the 4th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (December 1976) set out the foreign policy task of: “Striving the favorable international conditions to quickly heal the wounds of war, restore and develop the economy, develop culture, science, and technology, strengthen national defense, together with socialist countries, the peoples of the world fight for peace, national independence, democracy, and socialism.” [3].

In particular, one of the goals and measures to realize national interests during this period was determined by the Communist Party of Vietnam to be solidarity and comprehensive cooperation with the Soviet Union, considering this as “the cornerstone of foreign policy”, “the principle, the strategy” in foreign policy. Accordingly, Vietnam has taken advantage of the great and effective support and assistance of the Soviet Union in the cause of building and protecting the Fatherland. In June 1978, Vietnam joined the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (SEV). In November 1978, Vietnam and the Soviet Union signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation.

Vietnam's national interests also achieved an important step forward when Vietnam improved relations with neighboring countries in Southeast Asia. In May 1976, Vietnam announced a four-point policy with Southeast Asian countries, including: 1) Respect each other's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, do not invade each other, and do not interfere in each other's internal affairs, equality, mutual benefit, peaceful coexistence; 2) Do not let your country's territory be used by any foreign country as a base for invasion and intervention in other countries in the region;

¹ In the international political system, the theoretical schools use the concept of “state's interests” and “national interests”. However, the documents of the foreign relations policy, communications and the international academy in English, “national interests” is mainly used. Now the concept of

“country's interests” and “national interests” has been ever closely related and connected to each other. Therefore, in terms of connotation, it can be understood “national interest” as the nation state's interest.

3) Establish good neighbor relations and resolve disputes through negotiation; 4) Develop cooperation according to each country's own conditions for the sake of national independence, peace, and true neutrality in Southeast Asia.

After announcing the four-point policy, Vietnam established diplomatic relations with the Philippines (July 12, 1976) and Thailand (August 6, 1976), taking Vietnam one step further in breaking the siege and isolation, paving the way for the country's international integration process. In cooperation with Laos and Cambodia, Vietnam has strongly promoted dialogue among the three countries and cooperated with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Accordingly, from 1980–1986, every 6 months, three countries of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia held a conference at the level of Foreign Ministers to coordinate international activities.

Regarding the Republic of China, the 5th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (March 1982) affirmed: "Persevering with the policy of friendship and good neighborliness with the Chinese people, Vietnam advocates restoring normal relations between the two countries on the basis of the principles of peaceful coexistence, respect for each other's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity and resolution of disputes through negotiation." [4].

Regarding capitalist countries, Vietnam also actively promotes cooperative relations with Japan, Canada, Germany, and Australia..., thereby taking advantage of many sources of Official Development Assistance (ODA), humanitarian aid, and equipment. The Nordic countries only, from after 1975 to the end of 1978, gave Vietnam 612 million USD, of which 91% was ODA. In 1977, Vietnam officially became a member of the United Nations. From 1977–1986, the United Nations development system provided about 527.9 million USD in ODA to Vietnam, including 253 million USD from the World Food Program (WFP).

In general, before the Doi Moi (renovation) period, Vietnam's national interests mainly focused on implementing post-war economic recovery and creating a premise to carry out industrialization after the country was unified. Vietnam's foreign policy was still mainly based on the support of the Soviet Union and socialist countries to restore the economy and gradually build the country.

B. Situation of Ensuring Vietnam's National Interests from the Doi Moi (Renovation) Period to the Beginning of the 21st Century (1986–2001)

Entering the Doi Moi period, the Communist Party of Vietnam has innovated comprehensively, and considered maintaining a peaceful and stable environment for socio-economic development to be the highest interest of nation. Resolution No. 13-NQ/TW of the Politburo (1988) term VI affirmed: "The highest interest of the Party and people of Vietnam is to consolidate and maintain peace to focus on building the country and economic development."

Regarding the relationship between national interests and class interests, the Communist Party of Vietnam determines: Vietnam's striving to successfully build socialism, protect independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, socio-economic development, making the people richer and the country stronger is also the best way for Vietnam to fulfill its international obligations. In the new perception of the

Communist Party of Vietnam, when the reform process is successful, a stable and strong Vietnam will be an important contribution to the struggle of the world's people for peace, independence, democracy, and development [5].

In the early decades of the late 20th century, when the Soviet Union and the socialist system fell into crisis, the issue of the relationship between national interests and international obligations became even more important which the Communist Party of Vietnam urgently addressed. The 7th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (June 1991) determined that the foreign affairs task is to maintain peace, expand friendly relations and cooperation, especially economic cooperation, and create international conditions. Favorable for the cause of building and protecting the socialist Fatherland, while contributing to the common struggle of the world's people for peace, national independence, democracy, and social progress [6].

However, in 1991, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the socialist system had a significant impact on Vietnam. Faced with that situation, the 3rd Plenum of the 7th Central Committee (June 1992) of the Communist Party of Vietnam proposed one of four principles for handling international issues, which is "ensuring genuine national interests" [7].

The 8th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (June 1996) proposed a strategy to "industrialize and modernize" the country by 2020, which in terms of foreign affairs must: "Maintain independence and autonomy collaborate with expanding international cooperation, multilateralization, and diversification of foreign relations..." [8]. The cause of industrialization and modernization coupled with the process of international integration and regional integration has continued to promote the Communist Party of Vietnam's awareness of national interests in the reform period. The Communist Party of Vietnam's concept of security interests also shifted from traditional security to "comprehensive security" [9]. At the 8th Central Conference, Term VIII (December 1998), the Communist Party of Vietnam set goals for development and ensuring the maintenance of independence, autonomy, and national interests; Took advantage of favorable international conditions to serve the cause of industrialization, modernization, consolidation and enhancement of Vietnam's position in the world.

In short, because the Soviet Union and the socialist system no longer existed, Vietnam's national interests changed to breaking the siege and embargo and taking advantage of the support of the international community for Vietnam's innovation. Therefore, Vietnam has resolved a series of important relationships, such as normalizing relations with China and the US and becoming a member of the ASEAN. Those historical milestones have proven the correctness of persistently pursuing national interests based on harmony with the international community.

C. Situation of Ensuring Vietnam's National Interests in the Context of Proactive International Economic Integration (2001–2010)

Since the mid-90s of the 20th century, Vietnam has taken the economic innovation process one step further with the policy of proactive international economic integration.

Diplomatic activities with the mission of “serving the economy” contribute to promoting the process of deep integration of the economy. Inheriting and developing the views of the 8th Congress, the 9th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (April 2001) continued to emphasize: “Proactive international and regional economic integration in the spirit of maximizing, diversifying internal resources, improving the effectiveness of international cooperation, ensuring independence and autonomy and socialist orientation, protecting national interests and national security”; At the same time, declared: “Vietnam is ready to be a friend and a reliable partner of countries in the international community, striving for peace, independence and development.” [10]. The 8th Central Conference session IX (July 2003) determined: 1) Firmly protect independence, autonomy, unity, and territorial integrity; 2) Protect the Party, State, people, and socialist regime; 3) Protect the innovation and modernization of the country; 4) Protect national and ethnic interests; 5) Protect political security, social order and safety and culture; 6) Maintain political stability and a peaceful environment, develop the country according to socialist orientation [11]. Although the Resolution of the 8th Plenum of the 9th Central Committee does not classify national and ethnic interests according to criteria of importance, it emphasizes priority interests, which are: “Fixing the goal of national independence associated with socialism, considering maintaining a peaceful and stable environment for socio-economic development, implementing industrialization and modernization according to socialist orientation as the highest interests of the country.” [11]. The 10th Party Congress (April 2006) also stated clearly, “Taking serving the country’s interests as the highest goal.” [12]. To implement the socio-economic development strategy as the basis for determining the above national interests, the Party has directed the development and implementation of foreign policies clearly stated in the 10th Party Congress: “Consistently implement a foreign policy of independence, autonomy, peace, cooperation, and development; multilateralize, expand and diversify the international relations; proactively and actively integrate into the international economy. Vietnam is a friend and trusted partner of countries in the international community, actively participating in the process of international and regional cooperation... The task of foreign affairs is to maintain a peaceful environment, create favorable international conditions for innovation, promote socio-economic development, industrialization, modernization of the country, building and protect the Fatherland.” [12]. Thus, in the period 2001–2006, national interests in the foreign policy of the Party and government of Vietnam were shaped with basic contents, associated with the successful implementation of innovation, promoting socio-economic development, industrialization, modernization of the country, and building and firmly defending the socialist Fatherland.

During this time, Vietnam has achieved great and important achievements in the period of promoting industrialization and modernization. GDP in 2010 compared to 2000 at real prices was 3.26 times higher; GDP per capita reached 1.168 USD; Vietnam has come out of underdevelopment; political and social stability, people’s lives continue to improve, security is enhanced;

independence, sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity are maintained. However, Vietnam still has limitations: economic development is not sustainable; Quality, efficiency, and competitiveness are low, not commensurate with the country’s potential, opportunities, and development requirements. Overall, in the context of the global financial crisis, Vietnam has initially successfully implemented the reform process, moving out of underdevelopment and strengthening national synergy. This is an important premise for Vietnam to continue to develop stronger in the new period, successfully implementing the process of industrialization and modernization of the country. Vietnam has an increasingly high position and role in the international arena. Vietnam is a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), successfully completed the role of non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council for the 2008–2009 term, and successfully assumed the role of ASEAN Chairman in 2009–2010, making an important contribution to building the ASEAN Community. Vietnam has stable relations with all major countries and has been establishing a strategic partnership framework with most major countries. The country’s integration is becoming deeper and more comprehensive, the level of socio-economic integration is growing, and Vietnam’s international position and reputation have reached the highest level since the start of the innovation process.

D. Identifying Vietnam’s National Interests in the New Context

For Vietnam, *the viewpoint of the national interests has been inherited from the historical tradition of the country as well as the Ho Chi Minh diplomatic thought*: importance has always been attached to “the national interests” in the foreign relations that Vietnam has undertaken right since the beginning of renovation. This viewpoint has been expressed in the throughout goal: “*National independence and socialism*”. Over time, together with the development of the country and the changes of the world situation, the viewpoint of the national interests has continuously been added and completed through the National Congresses of the Communist Party of Vietnam. In the construction and defense of the Fatherland of Socialist Vietnam, importance has been attached to each advocacy, the policy on national development, and the foreign relations activities. The 11th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (2011), for the first time, had mentioned the goal of foreign relations “*in the national interests*” [13]. Inheriting and developing the viewpoint of foreign relations in the Program on national building during the transitional period to advance towards socialism (added and developed in 2011), the Resolution of the 12th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (2016) pointed out that the goal of foreign relations activities of the country had to be aimed at “*ensuring the supreme national interests, on the basis of the fundamental principles of international law, equality and mutual interests*” [14]. The 13th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (2021) clearly defined: “*Ensuring the highest national interests on the basis of the fundamental principles of the UN Charter and international law, equality, cooperation, mutual interests.*” [15]. Through it, the Communist Party of Vietnam has affirmed: 1) The country’s interests and the

national interests are identical; 2) Vietnam's national interests are not selfish interests; 3) Vietnam's national interests have been determined on the basis of the fundamental principles of the UN Charter and international law, equality, cooperation, mutual interests, together striving for peace, national independence, democracy and social progress in the world; 4) Ensuring the national interests at the highest means always making efforts to reach the national interests to the highest possible level, the national interests is the primary criterion to assess the effectiveness of all the foreign relations activities [16].

At present, the world is standing before the turning point of history in the stage of reshaping under the impact of COVID-19 pandemic, the geopolitical, geostrategic and geo-economics moves after the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the fast progress of science and technologies, great changes will be created, and Vietnam will be placed before great opportunities and challenges which are intermingled, complicated, even it is difficult to identify. That is why, it can be seen that the highest national interests of Vietnam in the current stage are *to defend firmly independence, sovereignty, unification and territorial integrity in close combination with the defense of the Party, the State, the people and the socialist regime, to protect the legitimate and legal interests of citizens as well as the Vietnamese enterprises at home and abroad; to protect the cause of renovation, industrialization, modernization; to protect the political security, the social order and safety and the national culture*. The new context of modern nation state will expand further the interests of nation state *such as peace, stability, cooperation, development, freedom in circulation of goods, free navigation, free aviation, free exploitation of resources in conformity with international law*. Like other nations, Vietnam is also proactive and actively participates in solving common problems of mankind, like *the combat against the war, the response to climate change, epidemics, the non-traditional security challenges* that none of the countries can be able to be strong enough to shoulder.

However, in the conditions of the ever-shrinking existence space, the expansion of the national interests of this country may negatively influence the national interests of other countries. To minimize the contradictions and conflicts, the national interests must conform to international law, no other countries are able to place their own excessive interests that could threaten the interests of other countries and influence the interests of the entire mankind. The fact shows that on the consistent basis of the foreign relations line of "independence, sovereignty, peace, friendship, cooperation and development, multilateralization and diversification of the foreign relations"; "to be proactive and active in the comprehensive, intensive and extensive international integration" [11]. Vietnam is always serious to comply with the international commitments that the country has participated, making full use of the effectiveness of the international rules and law, and taking part in community, regional, and international activities. At the same time, it is proactive in suggesting the constructive initiative to shape the multilateral institution in the principle of mutual interests, with the motto of vigorously transferring from attending to participating proactively; "being the friend, the reliable

partner and the active, responsible member in the international community" [11], particularly in the process of building and shaping the rules and mechanisms of cooperation and the new regulations, consolidating and raising the role in the regional and international communities, thus making an active contribution to the struggle for peace, national independence, democracy and social progress in the world.

Looking back at nearly 40 years of implementing the Doi Moi (renovation) process, thanks to the correct anticipation of the trend of the world, and the utilization of the external resources, Vietnam's renovation process has recorded the ever greater achievements in ensuring the national interests so as to lift its position and strength on the international arena, making a contribution to enhancing the national synergy in service of the construction and defence of the Fatherland of socialist Vietnam in the new situation.

However, to ensure the national interests, Vietnam has stood before a lot of advantages, but it has also faced with many common and private difficulties and challenges, including the proactiveness and activeness in the international integration and in boosting the multilateralized and diversified foreign relations activities at the regional and global levels to carry out and ensure the national interests in the context when the unpredictable changes of the regional and international situation are happening.

E. Solutions to Ensure Vietnam's National Interests in the Current Stage

Firstly, to continue to deploy effectively the guidelines, viewpoints, lines, foreign policy of the Party and State of Vietnam as follows: 1) To persistently implement the foreign policy of independence, self-reliance, multilateralization, diversification of the international relations; to be proactive and active in the intensive and extensive international integration; to be a friend and reliable partner and a responsible member of the international community; 2) To take advantage of opportunities, to continue to take the international relations to the depth, creating the intermingling of the interests of the big powers in Vietnam; to lift the level of multilateral and bilateral foreign relations; to carry out effectively the new generation Free Trade Agreements (FTA).

Secondly, to keep following closely the situation, apply the scientific method to evaluate correctly the regional and global situation; to grasp and anticipate the trends in international relations; as well as the strategic goals of countries, particularly the big powers towards the region in general and Vietnam in particular, so as to map out timely the suitable and precise guidelines and policies, in which "the national interests have to be ensured to the highest on the basis of the fundamental principles of UN Charter and the international law, equality, cooperation, and mutual interests"; under any circumstance, we must avoid falling into the dilemma between the parties.

Thirdly, to promote the synergy based on bringing into full play the national strength and the epochal strength, the domestic strength and the international strength so as to exploit and use effectively all the resources to meet adequately the requirements of the construction and defence

of the Fatherland in the new context. This is the issue of principle in the revolutionary guideline of the Communist Party of Vietnam.

Fourthly, to resolve harmoniously the relationship between the national interests and the common interests of the international community and the legitimate interests of other countries and nations. At present, all the countries in the world have attached importance to and increased the national interests when implementing foreign policies. But it is because of the development goal of each country and nation, the national interests of each country are also not completely identical, even conflicting with each other. Therefore, to have an environment of peace, security, and stability in service of sustainable development for each country and nation, an important issue here is to find the “identical point”. The identical point here is the respect for the fundamental principles of the UN Charter and international law that the entire mankind has been striving to maintain to adjust the relations arisen among countries and the subjects in all areas of international life. Therefore, since the Democratic Republic of Vietnam came into being, Vietnam has always respected and protected the fundamental principles of the UN Charter and international law and this is also the guarantee of Vietnam’s national interests, at the same time the guarantee of the harmony of the interests of partners, the common interests of the regional and international communities.

Fifthly, to continue to create and develop the images of Vietnam as “a responsible” country, “a reliable partner”. This is an objective of domestic and foreign characters. In a world full of changes with intermingled advantages, opportunities, difficulties, and challenges, latent with the uncertain elements for the development process, Vietnam has got positive developments in the economic, political, and social fields. The image, position, and national prestige of Vietnam have been ever more affirmed and raised in the international arena. The confidence of the international community in the political institution and the governing capacities of Vietnam has become ever more solid. The aspiration for building a powerful country has been ever more deeply aware of and strongly aroused. Therefore, the image of Vietnam which is stable and full of potential for development, is joining together with the world to build the common peace needs continuing to have a spillover, a widespread popularization, thus contributing to the economic growth, the political and social stability, the defence and security to take the country to the new development stage.

Sixthly, to ensure security and development for the people in the community of ethnicities of Vietnam. The nation state of Vietnam is a unified community, creating the synergy to protect independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and economic development. The interests of the ethnicity’s community have implied the interests of each individual, the national security cannot be separated from the human security. The foreign relations activities, in the final analyses, are aimed at bringing about the interests to the people, creating conditions for the people to have opportunities for all-round development. In a broader look in the region, this objective is in conformity with the context of the ASEAN countries which are striving to build an ASEAN Community

in the direction of the people and “taking the people as the center”.

Seventhly, to improve the effectiveness of the research work, consolidate and develop information and propaganda, particularly the foreign relations information in the new situation for the guarantee of the national interests; to make full use of the effectiveness of the strength of information technology and communications in order to expedite continuously and persistently the communications programs on culture, country, people of Vietnam; on the sovereignty of Vietnam in history and at present, helping lift the image and avail ourselves of the support of countries, of the world people for the protection of sovereignty as well as the national construction and development of Vietnam.

In general, in all the stages of the revolution of Vietnam, the national interests are both the goal and the motto and the impetus of development. The present achievements of the country are clear evidence of the viewpoint that “Ensuring the highest the national interests on the basis of the fundamental principles of the UN Charter and international law, equality, cooperation, mutual interests” of the Communist Party of Vietnam is completely correct and clear-sighted; the favorable condition for Vietnam to continue promoting the position, to select the suitable plans in ensuring the national interests.

III. CONCLUSION

The national interests are considered as “the key-stone” or the “lodestar” of the foreign policy. The connotation of the national interests sometimes includes also the instruments selected to carry out the strategic and diplomatic objectives which are one of the important instruments to realize this objective. To be able to escape from the “trap” in the process of determining and optimizing the national interests is an issue of great importance for each country, irrespective of a small or big country, when the facts have shown that successes are many but failures are also a lot. In determining and implementing the guarantee of the national interests, it is necessary to pay attention to harmoniously treat the fundamental interests that include the personal interests, the group interests, the class interests, the national interests, and the international interests. Theory and realities show that this is no easy work for each individual and collective unit relating to the process of determining and implementing the national interests which often inclines to the concept of the interests of country from the local perspective. Therefore, it is necessary to enhance the sharing of information, build consensus, and create the coordinating mechanism. Besides, it is necessary to treat the relationship between the national interests in a specific issue and the overall interests, to treat the “immediate” and “long-term” interests. The long-term interests are the “invariable” interests, important in the process of existence and development and the immediate interests once obtained must not do harm to the long-term interests.

The world is changing constantly, and each country, particularly the small and medium countries, is demanded to always stick closely to the regional and world situation, through which it can point out the trend of development of the political and security situation in the world and the region, forecast the situations in a timely manner that can happen to

do harm to the national interests. This demand stems from the system theory – that considers the world as a perfect whole system that each country, nation is a componential part and countries have an interactive relationship and are dependent on each other. Firmly grasping the world and regional situation will help countries correctly determine their strategic goals, the national interests, and the way of optimizing the national interests.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors whose names are listed immediately below certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Thuy Thanh Thi Nghiem wrote the manuscript; Hanh Hong Bui and Huong Thu Thi Doan edited and provided additional inputs for the manuscript; all authors had approved the final version.

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