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Vietnam Should Abandon Non-Alignment Now

The outcome of the recent Party Congress provides Hanoi with the opportunity to rethink its foreign policy.

By **Nhung Bui** for *The Diplomat*



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This month, Vietnam's 12th Party Congress reappointed the conservative leader Nguyen Phu Trong for another term as the party's General Secretary. In the wake of this political reshuffling, it is important for Vietnamese leaders to rethink their foreign policy directions and explore new strategies to deal with an assertive China. In particular, while Trong's victory is a disappointment to those championing broader economic liberalization, it provides a window of opportunity for Vietnam's leaders to abandon the principle of non-alignment which has long served as a basic guideline in its foreign policy without provoking a severe backlash from China.

Vietnam's non-alignment principle is part of the "three nos" package, summed up as no participation in military alliances, no foreign military bases on Vietnamese territory, and no reliance on one country to fight against another. Supporters of the principle believe that maintaining equal distance between the great powers would serve Vietnam's interests, for leaning towards the United States would only provoke counterbalancing actions by China.

Yet rising tensions in the South China Sea between Vietnam and China have led to a fierce debate about the merits of this approach, with many voices calling Vietnam to abandon its non-alignment stance. These reformist voices argue that Vietnam needs greater concrete support from and even a military alliance with an outside power – potentially the United States – in order to protect its territory against China's encroachments.

While there are merits to both sides of the argument, there is a middle path that Vietnam can walk by simultaneously abandoning the non-alignment policy as well as avoid provoking China. General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, who has been less outspoken about China's assertive actions, is arguably in a better position to walk this path than former premier Nguyen Tan Dung, considered by western observers as a pro-West reformer and vocal opponent of China's aggressive actions. Secretary Trong can better convince Chinese counterparts that even if Vietnam drops its non-alignment position, it would not form an alliance with an outside actor any time soon. If, on the other hand, the same announcement came from former prime minister Dung, Chinese leaders would take this as a sign that Vietnam is seriously pursuing a balancing posture.

Critics of the current non-alignment stance argue that Vietnam needs to form alliances with external actors in order to check China's expansion, a position that is reasonable given China's extensive island reclamation projects and its provocative installation of the Haiyang Shiyu 981 oil rig in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone in 2014.

However, an alliance with the United States or Japan cannot be realized overnight and Vietnam needs time to convince these countries to support it. Even though the United States and Japan have tensions with China, there are limits right now to how far these countries can go to back Vietnam in its territorial disputes. While they might be ready to aid Vietnam's procurement of surveillance vessels and aircrafts, they would probably be unwilling to provide concrete commitments. The United States is already facing a headache because it is obliged by treaty to defend the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. More broadly, divergent interests and the gap in the willingness to fight would make the United States and Japan unlikely to form a significant pact with Vietnam soon.

Even though drastic alignment changes are unlikely in this sense, abandoning the non-alignment policy now can be beneficial down the road. First, it would signal to other actors with similar interests that Vietnam is willing to consider forming an alliance as an option. This possibility would at least generate interest and policy debates in the United States, Japan or the Philippines. Politicians and military personnel could at least incorporate the possibility of an alliance with Vietnam in back-up scenarios. The change would also stimulate discussions among civilian analysts and the public. These debates and contingency plans could in the long run facilitate policy shifts when actors are willing to commit.

In short, while abandoning the "three nos" policy right now might not lead to an alliance in two years, it could lead to one in ten years. Getting various constituencies on board in general or planning for specific measures like a new military base takes time in these countries. Thus, it is in Vietnam's interest to at least start the ball rolling now. Of course, Hanoi needs to buy time for all of this to happen, which will require reassuring Beijing in the meantime which Secretary Trong would be more capable of doing.

Second, Beijing might even see an opportunity for itself if Hanoi drops its non-alignment principle if the latter can signal that its alignment choices are still open; in other words, that leaning towards the United States is not the default option. In recent years, certain influential voices in China have called the country to pursue external alliances. If China wants to lead Asia, these individuals contend, it needs to bridge the great gap with the United States, which has a number of reliable and strong allies and security partners in the region. China's reaction to Vietnam's abandoning the non-alignment principle under Secretary Trong is still uncertain. The response would depend on how well the new leadership can convince Beijing that no drastic change would occur any time soon and how well they take advantage of Beijing's own insecurities while firmly protecting Vietnamese interests.

Most importantly, the dangerous scenario that Hanoi needs to protect itself against is a much more aggressive and belligerent Beijing intent on controlling the South China Sea and dominating Vietnamese politics and economics. If this happens in the future and Vietnam decides late in the game to abandon its non-alignment policy, it would send a strong signal to China that Vietnam is seeking help from the outside and is balancing against China. A much more hawkish China would respond with severe forms of punishment. At that time, it would be even harder for Vietnam to maintain strategic ambiguity between the two camps.

In short, abandoning the "three nos" at this point – when Vietnam's position towards China and the United States is still somewhat balanced with the reappointment of Secretary Trong – is likely more advantageous than at a later point, when an action like that, and especially from a more outspoken leader, would send a much more decisive signal. Vietnam's leaders should not assume that maintaining the status-quo would help them in the long run; rather they should take this opportunity, while Chinese leaders seem to be content with the Vietnamese party congress outcome, to shake off the non-alignment principle.

Nhung Bui is a PhD Candidate in the Politics Department at Princeton University and a research associate at the Center for International Studies (SCIS) at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City. She works on media and nationalist propaganda in China and Vietnam.