

VIETNAM IN 2020

Author(s): Hai Hong Nguyen

Source: *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2021, (2021), pp. 381-404

Published by: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27075091>

## REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27075091?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27075091?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Southeast Asian Affairs*

JSTOR

# VIETNAM IN 2020: The Year in Transition

Hai Hong Nguyen

On 30 December 2019, speaking at the virtual year-end national conference between the central and local governments, the secretary-general of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and president of Vietnam, Nguyen Phu Trong, set the scene for the country in 2020:

It is the final year of the current tenure [of the 12th Party Congress], which will have a decisive significance for the successful completion of the tasks set out in the 12th Party Congress Resolution. It is also the year that will see: congresses of party committees at all local levels to be held in the lead-up to the 13th National Party Congress, the celebration of the 90th anniversary of the founding of the CPV and the Vietnam Fatherland Front, 75 years of Vietnam's national independence, the 130th birthday of President Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam taking the rotational ASEAN chairmanship and the non-permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council for the 2020–2021 term, and many other political events of paramount significance.<sup>1</sup>

Unforeseen in Trong's vision were the ramifications of the coronavirus pandemic, known as COVID-19. Though COVID-19 had significant adverse impacts on both domestic politics and foreign relations during the year, Vietnam's effective response to the pandemic not only earned credit for the Vietnamese government overseas<sup>2</sup> but also intensified the CPV's legitimacy at home.<sup>3</sup> At the same government function on 28 December 2020, almost one year later, Trong was able to define 2020 as "more successful than 2019 and the most successful year in the past five years". Trong singled out achievements on the following five fronts:

---

HAI HONG NGUYEN is Honorary Research Fellow at the Centre for Policy Futures, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, the University of Queensland, Australia.

First, the prompt, timely, flexible and effective responses to COVID-19 and national disasters. Second, making all efforts to maintain and recover the economy to achieve the possible highest growth rate. Third, continued progress in the cultural, social, healthcare, education and training and science and technology sectors. Fourth, crucial achievements in foreign relations and international integration, contributing to the elevation of the country's credibility and position in the international arena. National defence and security continued to be intensified; national sovereignty, peaceful environment and stability were preserved, creating favourable conditions for national development. Fifth, party building work and the political system were constantly enhanced, acquiring impressive and outstanding outcomes which demonstrated positive changes and clear-cut quality improvements.<sup>4</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Trong did not forget to credit the role of “patriotism, national unity and pride, people's trust in the party leadership and state management, as well as the superiority of the socialist system being pursued in the country” for Vietnam's accomplishments.<sup>5</sup> Objectively, this ideological claim has some basis. Vietnam effectively contained COVID-19,<sup>6</sup> delivered positive economic growth<sup>7</sup> and demonstrated “successful” foreign relations<sup>8</sup> in a challenging year around the globe. With COVID-19 sweeping the world and causing massive losses of human life in many Western societies, Vietnam's success has prompted many to ponder whether authoritarian regimes were able to govern their societies more effectively than democratic ones.<sup>9</sup>

This chapter takes stock of the developments in 2020 in Vietnam's foreign relations and domestic politics. On the domestic front, three key matters will be analysed. The first is the political developments leading up to the CPV's National Congress that will be held in January 2021. A broad examination suggests that though democratic reforms within the party have been made and are arguably more advanced than those in the Chinese Communist Party, there is hardly any change with respect to the party's power structures and operational processes. The CPV essentially still follows a Stalinist model in which all power is vested with the party, enabling the party to select and determine, without elections, who would lead state ministries and agencies, making the promise of “building a state of the people, by the people, and for the people”, as articulated in the CPV's documents, ring hollow. One consequence arising from the lack of transparency in the CPV's selection of leaders is the never-ending speculation about infighting within the party, which is hardly dampened by the party chief's direction that “the Congress is an opportune occasion to sort out and purify cadres”.<sup>10</sup>

The second political matter that drew no less public attention in 2020 is the anti-corruption campaign popularly known as *đốt lò* (“furnance burning”, as described by Trong).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, never in the seventy-five-year history of the CPV had there been such a large number of corruption cases involving high-ranking government and party officials. The individuals implicated include even members of the CPV’s politburo and the central committee, and they were variously investigated, disciplined, prosecuted, charged in court and expelled from the party.<sup>12</sup>

The third key issue in Vietnam’s domestic politics is the country’s notorious human rights record.<sup>13</sup> The deadly clashes between the police and villagers in Đồng Tâm over land disputes and the intimidation, harassment, restrictions on movement, physical assaults, arbitrary arrests and imprisonment of bloggers and activists are in sharp tension with the impressive achievements on the economic front and the fight against COVID-19. The party state’s breaches of human rights can be attributed to the perceived threat to the CPV’s monopoly of power and national security.

On foreign relations, the general impression is that Vietnam successfully fulfilled a “double task” as the ASEAN chair and a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). It is no exaggeration to claim that, despite COVID-19, or perhaps precisely because of its response to the pandemic, Vietnam’s conduct of diplomacy in 2020 has substantially contributed to the elevation of the country’s influence and reputation in the global arena.

## **Domestic Politics: The Party Congress, Anti-Corruption and Human Rights**

Other than the battle against COVID-19, these three topics stood out and drew the greatest public attention throughout the year.

### ***The Party Congress: The Art of Power Arrangement***

The Party Congress is like a crowd creating a mosaic using an established set of pieces—in this case, the crowd is the 180 official members and 20 alternate members of the CPV Central Committee. The process of assembling such a harmonious picture is therefore comparable to the art of power arrangement.

The CPV’s preparations for its 13th National Congress, set to be held between 25 January and 2 February 2021, began at the end of 2018. As part of its routine business, the congress elects the members of the Central Committee, who then elect among themselves the secretary-general and members of the secretariat and

the politburo. Special attention is being paid to the upcoming 13th Congress because the “four pillars”—referring to the secretary-general, the state president, the prime minister and the chairperson of the National Assembly—are expected to step down because their current holders will exceed the stipulated age limit.<sup>14</sup> The party, however, has invented the “special case” (*trường hợp đặc biệt*) exception to circumvent the age limit. This has invited speculation over whether the “special case” exception might be extended to any one of the following four at the 13th Congress: Secretary-General Trong (who assumed the additional role of head of state following President Tran Dai Quang’s sudden death in August 2018), Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, National Assembly Chair Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan and Executive Member of the CPV Secretariat Tran Quoc Vuong.<sup>15</sup> In particular, Decision No. 1722 issued in November 2020 by Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, which categorized the party’s plans for the “four pillars plus” positions<sup>16</sup> as “top secret”,<sup>17</sup> has prompted rumours about party in-fighting.<sup>18</sup> The CPV has, however, made ambiguity into an art form, rendering predictions foolhardy.<sup>19</sup>

Prior to the 13th Congress, a list was circulated containing the names of more than 300 “strategic cadres” (*cán bộ cấp chiến lược*), from which the 200 elected members of the Central Committee for the next five years (and even beyond) might be drawn. Even though the CPV has found, in a self-assessment, that the personnel planning and preparation for the 13th Congress has been more democratic and thorough compared to the 12th Congress in 2016,<sup>20</sup> the politburo continues to set the rules and decide who will be included in the candidates list.<sup>21</sup>

At the provincial level, the CPV implemented a series of rotations of cadres (*điều động cán bộ*) throughout the year despite the impact of COVID-19. Prior to each provincial party committee conference, the politburo often intervened in the personnel list that had been prepared by the local party functionaries. The intervention takes the form of the “introduction” of a person rotated from another province or central government agency, who would then be elected as the secretary of the provincial party committee.<sup>22</sup> The data shows that 27 of the 67 secretaries of provincial and municipal party committees, who will be among the 200 members of the next Central Committee, are not local to the areas where they were elected.<sup>23</sup> The reason for the cadre rotation policy has never been disclosed, but it appears that the party is concerned that enduring concentrations of local power and connections can give rise to local-level corruption. It is not yet clear whether this technique of power arrangement is effective in reducing corruption. Nevertheless, it indicates the party’s self-awareness that party members and government officials can find opportunities to abuse their power for personal gains in an authoritarian regime.

### **Anti-Corruption: “Đốt lò” (furnace blazing)**

The *đốt lò*, the anti-corruption campaign led by Secretary-General Trong, continued to blaze in 2020. Le Thanh Hai, a former politburo member and the secretary of the Ho Chi Minh Municipal Party Committee, and Hoang Trung Hai, an incumbent politburo member and the secretary of the Hanoi Municipal Party Committee, were disciplined on 8 and 10 January respectively and issued warnings for “serious wrongdoings”.<sup>24</sup> Hoang Trung Hai’s position in Hanoi was then taken over by Deputy Prime Minister Vuong Dinh Hue. In August, Nguyen Duc Chung, a member of the CPV Central Committee and the chairperson of the Hanoi Municipal People’s Committee, was arrested and prosecuted for the crime of appropriating secret state documents in connection with a money laundering case.<sup>25</sup> In December, Chung was given a five-year prison sentence<sup>26</sup> and expelled from the party.<sup>27</sup> A warning was also given to Nguyen Van Binh, a politburo member and the chairperson of the Central Commission for Economic Affairs (CCEA).<sup>28</sup> Binh was disciplined for “serious wrongdoings” during his tenure as the governor of the State Bank of Vietnam under the government of former prime minister Nguyen Tan Dung. In addition, two members of the CPV Central Committee—the party secretary of Quang Ngai<sup>29</sup> and a deputy chairperson of the CCEA<sup>30</sup>—were also given warnings.

The term *đốt lò*, or “furnace blazing”, was coined by Trong during a 2016 meeting with his constituents in Hanoi when he likened his anti-corruption efforts to a blazing furnace that would burn both dry and fresh firewood, suggesting that corrupt officials—whether still serving or retired—would be held accountable. Trong’s anti-graft efforts began with his failed attempt to punish a member of the politburo at a party conference in 2012.<sup>31</sup> It was speculated that the politburo member in question was then–prime minister Nguyen Tan Dung,<sup>32</sup> who ran a government rife with patronage and rent-seeking.<sup>33</sup> Since 2016, after being re-elected to a second term, Trong has strongly pushed forward with the *đốt lò* campaign. Subsequent grand corruption cases have been pursued and investigated under Trong’s direction. Dozens of incumbent and former high-ranking government officials, many of whom reportedly had close connections with the retired Nguyen Tan Dung, have been prosecuted and brought to trial.

Trong’s *đốt lò* campaign heated up further in 2020 in the run up to 13th Party Congress. In a meeting of the Central Steering Committee for Anti-Corruption under his chairmanship, Trong instructed that “officials who appear to be involved in embezzlement and corruption must not be elected to the next party committee. The Party Congress is a chance to sort out and purify cadres.”<sup>34</sup> Trong’s *đốt lò*

has been compared to Chinese President Xi Jinping's "beating tiger, killing flies" (*đả hổ, diệt ruồi*) campaign, which has purged Xi's rivals and consolidated his power.<sup>35</sup> This observation might not be valid in Trong's case, however, and his anti-corruption efforts to "clean" the party are best interpreted as being sincere. A Marxist theoretician who is ideologically committed to communism, Trong appears to be seeking to solidify the legitimacy of the CPV's rule and prevent the regime's collapse from within—a lesson that Vietnamese leaders have drawn from the break-up of communist regimes in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. What has been a concern is whether the *đốt lò* campaign will continue in the post-Trong era. Though Trong himself has said that the fight against corruption has become "an irreversible movement and trend",<sup>36</sup> and that there is nothing to prevent the anti-corruption drive from moving forward,<sup>37</sup> much depends on the outcome of the 13th Congress and what happens afterward.

### ***Human Rights and Freedoms: Worse Records***

Human Rights Watch, a Washington-based organization that monitors the state of human rights around the world, issued a report in January 2021 on human rights conditions for 2020 in one hundred countries, including Vietnam. The report states that the party state "continued to systematically violate basic civil and political rights in 2020".<sup>38</sup> As has often been recorded, criticism or activities considered to pose a threat to security, to defame government officials or challenge the legitimacy of the party state are not tolerated by the authorities. The party state considers regime security a priority at all times, and the police are deemed "the crown sword" to protect the regime. Vietnamese leaders often remind the police that "if the party survives, so do you".<sup>39</sup> Because of this it appears that human rights violations committed by the police are overlooked.

Serious violations of human rights in Vietnam in 2020 began with the deadly 9 January clashes between police and residents in Dong Tam commune, about forty kilometres from Hanoi, over land disputes. The Ministry of Public Security marked the incident as a "public order disturbance",<sup>40</sup> while many social media activists called it an "attack" by the police on innocent villagers.<sup>41</sup> The collusion between authorities and vested interests over the land also drew the attention of the international media.<sup>42</sup> Three police officers and a villager were killed in the clashes.<sup>43</sup> While the three deceased policemen were posthumously honoured by the state as heroic martyrs for sacrificing their lives "for peace of the people", an eighty-four-year-old village elder known as Kinh, who was stamped to death by the police, was described as a "terrorist".<sup>44</sup> In September, twenty-nine members

of Mr Kinh's extended family were charged by the Hanoi Municipal People's Court for the crime of "murder and obstruction of officials in Dong Tam". Of these twenty-nine, two defendants were sentenced to death and one was handed life imprisonment. Following the trial, local human rights activists published an independent report on the Dong Tam incident, providing facts that showed the violations of human rights by the police.<sup>45</sup> The government, however, accused activists of using social media to impart disinformation about the incident.<sup>46</sup> According to a report in January by Amnesty International, three activists were arrested for social media posts they made about the clashes in Dong Tam, while a dozen Facebook users had their access to the platform restricted.<sup>47</sup> In November, a group of UN human rights experts and special rapporteurs expressed their concerns over the government's arrests of human rights defenders throughout the year for their advocacy of the Dong Tam case.<sup>48</sup>

Statistics presented by human rights organizations and activists indicate Vietnam's deteriorating human rights record in 2020. Reporters Without Borders revealed that approximately twenty-five journalists and bloggers were arrested and held in jail in 2020 for offences such as conducting "activities aimed at overthrowing the government", disseminating "anti-state propaganda" and "abusing the rights to freedom and democracy to threaten the interests of the state".<sup>49</sup> Local human rights activists have also reported that a total of seventy-two people, including social media users, dissidents and human rights defenders, have been arrested, detained and given prison sentences.<sup>50</sup> More recently, Vietnam faced outrage from the international human rights community<sup>51</sup> in response to the arrests and imprisonments of well-known human rights and civil society activists such as Pham Chi Thanh,<sup>52</sup> Pham Doan Trang<sup>53</sup> and three members of the Independent Journalists' Association of Vietnam (Pham Chi Dung, Nguyen Tuong Thuy and Le Huu Minh).<sup>54</sup> The 88 Project, a US-based organization tracking the human rights situation in Vietnam, reported that many political prisoners were subjected to torture in 2020.<sup>55</sup> The party state has always rejected and condemned these criticisms as advocacy for illegal acts and outrage against the regime.<sup>56</sup>

According to Carl Thayer, a Vietnam expert at the University of New South Wales, the arrests of the regime's dissidents and critics are "indirectly related to the forthcoming national party congress and part of a continuing process of stamping out dissent on sensitive social issues and deterring others from following suit".<sup>57</sup> As Vietnam will have new leadership after the 13th Congress and the May 2021 national elections, Thayer described the timing of the crackdown as "conducive for prospective future party leaders to demonstrate their loyalty to the socialist one-party regime by squelching pro-democracy activists", while predicting that the



leadership transition “will only reinforce the existing system and continue to oppose political pluralism”.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, there is no sign to suggest that an improvement in Vietnam’s human rights record should be expected in 2021 or the years to come.

## Foreign Relations

In 2020, Vietnam emerged not only as an active and proactive player on the international stage but also as a rule maker on both regional and international stages. In addition to undertaking the “dual tasks” of being the ASEAN Chair and a non-permanent member of the UNSC, Vietnam actively participated in and contributed to other regional and international mechanisms such as APEC and the G20 and concluded the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement. Vietnam also engaged in the so-called “face mask diplomacy” as the world struggled with COVID-19 and successfully promoted the internationalization of the issue of the South China Sea (or the East Sea in Vietnamese). The country also held a series of commemorative activities to mark its diplomatic relations with many countries and regional bodies, including the twenty-fifth anniversary of the country’s membership in ASEAN, seventy years of diplomatic relations with both China and Russia, twenty-five years of the normalization of diplomatic relations with the United States and thirty years of relations with the European Union.

Vietnam’s busy diplomatic schedule in 2020 reflects the continuity of its consistent foreign policy of pursuing “diversification and multilateralisation of external relations, active and proactive international integration”<sup>59</sup> that was adopted at the 7th Congress in 1991. More specifically, this policy has sought to “attach importance to and deepen” bilateral diplomacy and “actively and proactively participate and make contribution to building and shaping”<sup>60</sup> international mechanisms in multilateral diplomacy.

### *Multilateral Diplomacy: “Active and Proactive” Approach*

Vietnam’s multilateral diplomacy in 2020 was reflected in its role as the ASEAN Chair and a non-permanent UNSC member for a two-year term from 2020 to 2021.

## ASEAN

Having taken the rotational chairmanship of ASEAN, Vietnam proposed the theme of “Cohesive and Responsive” for the regional grouping in 2020, which consisted of five priorities; namely, “to actively contribute to a regional environment of peace, security and stability”, “to bring prosperity through regional integration and

connectivity, heighten ASEAN's adaptability to the 4th Industrial Revolution to grasp opportunities", "to raise the awareness of ASEAN Community and Identity", "to strengthen partnerships for peace and sustainable development, and promote the role and contribution of ASEAN in the international community" and "enhance the capacity and operational efficiency of ASEAN".<sup>61</sup> But the unforeseen outbreak and swift spread of COVID-19 forced Vietnam to adjust the proceedings of the organization and the content of its meetings. The most evident adjustment was for all meetings to be convened virtually. More than five hundred virtual meetings were nimbly organized.<sup>62</sup> Vietnam proactively supported collaboration within ASEAN and between ASEAN and its external partners in response to COVID-19. The efforts of Vietnam went beyond statements<sup>63</sup> to include concrete action such as establishing the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund,<sup>64</sup> setting-up a Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies for Public Health Emergencies<sup>65</sup> and initiating frameworks and measures to boost economic recovery in the post-COVID context through tourism, agriculture and employment. Under Vietnam's leadership, ASEAN also held special meetings with its major external partners on COVID-19, such as the 14 April summit between ASEAN members and the three East Asian nations of China, Japan and the Republic of Korea,<sup>66</sup> the 23 April meeting between the foreign ministers of ASEAN and the United States<sup>67</sup> and the 17 June meeting between the foreign ministers of ASEAN and Russia.<sup>68</sup>

Vietnam also actively worked with other ASEAN members to foster specific measures to strengthen the ASEAN community with the adoption of the Hanoi Declaration on the ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision.<sup>69</sup> The instrument aims to intensify cohesion, unity, thinking and community-oriented actions within ASEAN. The grouping also continued to discuss and collaborate on regional issues, including on the South China Sea dispute.

Additionally, under Vietnam's chairmanship in 2020, ASEAN and the European Union elevated their Dialogue Partnership into a Strategic Partnership.<sup>70</sup> Colombia, Cuba and South Africa signed instruments of accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (which serves as the foundational treaty of ASEAN),<sup>71</sup> while France and Italy officially became ASEAN's development partners.<sup>72</sup> Another remarkable milestone reached under Vietnam's chairmanship was the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which further fosters regional economic integration among fifteen Asia-Pacific countries.

Overall, more than eighty documents were signed and adopted, representing a solid achievement for Vietnam's chairmanship of ASEAN, particularly given the impact of COVID-19. Vietnam demonstrated its leadership capability and emerged as "a strong, trustworthy and special mainstay" within ASEAN.<sup>73</sup>

### *The United Nations*

The United Nations occupies a crucial place in Vietnam's strategy of multilateral diplomacy. During the week of 22 to 29 September to observe the 75th anniversary of the founding of the UN, all three top Vietnamese leaders (Secretary-General and President Nguyen Phu Trong,<sup>74</sup> Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc<sup>75</sup> and Chairperson of the National Assembly Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan<sup>76</sup>) delivered pre-recorded messages to the UN General Assembly highlighting the role of the world body and Vietnam's commitment to promoting multilateral diplomacy. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Pham Binh Minh also delivered a message reiterating Vietnam's commitment to nuclear weapons disarmament and non-proliferation efforts to a high-level meeting commemorating the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons on 2 October.<sup>77</sup>

When Vietnam was elected to be a non-permanent member of the UNSC for the 2020–21 term it was the country's second appointment to the role and considered "a big honour".<sup>78</sup> Compared to its previous 2008–9 term, Vietnam was a far more active and proactive UNSC member this time around. In the first month of returning to the UNSC, Vietnam presided over the body and initiated a ministerial-level open debate,<sup>79</sup> which resulted in the first-ever Statement by the President of the UNSC calling on the world to uphold the values and principles of the UN Charter, such as "non-use of force, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and peaceful dispute settlement".<sup>80</sup> In December, Vietnam hosted a global conference on "Women, Peace and Security".<sup>81</sup>

Having taken concurrent presidency of both ASEAN and the UNSC in January 2020, Vietnam presided over the briefing about UNSC-ASEAN cooperation in maintaining international peace and security.<sup>82</sup> The meeting was not only the first of its kind to mark the cooperation between the UNSC and a regional organization, but it also heightened the role of ASEAN at the global level.<sup>83</sup>

More specifically, Vietnam made a mark on the global scene when it took the lead in successfully negotiating the passage of UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/75/27,<sup>84</sup> which was co-sponsored by 107 countries and adopted on 7 December, proclaiming 27 December as the annual International Day of Epidemic Preparedness. The resolution recorded Vietnam's role in driving collaboration in multilateral mechanisms.

### *South China Sea*

Developments in late 2019 and during the first half of 2020 offered an opportunity for regional observers to reflect on China's "business as usual" conduct based on its

groundless and excessive territorial claims in the South China Sea.<sup>85</sup> China, as one of the six territorial claimants in the South China Sea, continually rebuffs attempts to bring the dispute into multilateral forums. But under Vietnam's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2020, the South China Sea situation continued to be discussed and was referred to in the Chairman's Statements of the 36th and 37th ASEAN Summits.<sup>86</sup> In particular, the Chairman's Statement of the 37th ASEAN Summit accentuated the importance of upholding the principles of international law and the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Vietnam's chair statements in 2020 were a relative departure from the softer approach adopted in the chair's statements of the previous years, particularly with respect to the importance of UNCLOS.<sup>87</sup>

Vietnam's success in including two robust paragraphs on the South China Sea in the Chairman's Statements should be seen through the lens of the country's strategy of multilateral diplomacy and its endorsement of an approach that internationalizes a dispute that involves multiple claimants.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, it goes without saying that more assertive actions by ASEAN and Vietnam were encouraged by statements and comments made by the United States,<sup>89</sup> the United Kingdom, France and Germany<sup>90</sup> denouncing China's nine-dash-line claim and its aggressive actions in the South China Sea. This collective response was seemingly effective as China refrained from undertaking any aggressive action in the South China Sea in the second half of 2020.

### ***Bilateral Diplomacy: "Placing Importance and Deepening" Drive***

Even though it had to control the coronavirus outbreak domestically, Vietnam turned the global pandemic crisis into an opportunity to wield its soft power and burnish its credentials as a reliable partner for foreign countries and a responsible member of the international community. Quite early on, Vietnam, despite its lack of resources, implemented what has been called "COVID diplomacy"<sup>91</sup> or "face mask diplomacy"<sup>92</sup> to fortify its foreign relations. Countries that received donations of face masks from Vietnam were mainly its neighbouring countries, including China, Laos and Cambodia, and the nation's seventeen strategic and comprehensive partners across Southeast Asia and East Asia, in Europe, North America and the Pacific. This is in accord with Vietnam's approach of "placing importance and deepening" bilateral diplomacy, in which priority is given first and foremost to its neighbouring countries followed by strategic, comprehensive and other important partners.

Vietnam's bilateral diplomacy demonstrated flexibility and adaptability to the situation during the COVID-19 crisis. As the outbreak prevented face-to-face meetings, Vietnam invigorated its bilateral relations through "telephone diplomacy". More than thirty-three telephone conversations took place between Vietnamese leaders and their foreign counterparts. When COVID-19 was brought under control, Vietnam hosted visits by the South Korean foreign minister in September,<sup>93</sup> the United Kingdom's foreign secretary<sup>94</sup> and international trade secretary (who was in Hanoi to conclude the UK-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement) respectively in September and December<sup>95</sup> and the United States' secretary of state<sup>96</sup> and national security adviser<sup>97</sup> respectively in October and November. Japan's Yoshihide Suga chose to visit Vietnam for his first foreign trip as prime minister in October, indicating Vietnam's importance to the Japanese Indo-Pacific strategy.<sup>98</sup> Regional observers also took note that Vietnam was the only Southeast Asian nation excluded from Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's 2020 regional tour. This was because of Vietnam's tougher stances on the South China Sea and Mekong River issues.<sup>99</sup>

Vietnam's relations with the United States, Japan and India (three of the four countries in the Quadrilateral arrangement, which also includes Australia) stood out among the country's bilateral relations in 2020.

If not for COVID-19, Secretary-General and State President Trong would have visited Washington DC at the invitation of President Donald Trump to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two former wartime foes. Trump had extended the invitation to Trong in February 2019 when the former was in Hanoi for the summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. But, because of the pandemic and a minor stroke Trong suffered in April 2019, he was unable to make the visit a reality.

The two countries nevertheless held various significant activities to commemorate the anniversary. Trong and Trump exchanged congratulatory messages confirming the determination by the two sides to consolidate and amplify their comprehensive partnership based on a "shared vision of a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific and respect for each other's sovereignty".<sup>100</sup> In March, the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* made a port call in Vietnam—thus being the second American aircraft carrier to do so—to implicitly send out a message underscoring the depth of the two countries' strategic ties. As mentioned, there were also visits by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien.

All was not plain sailing, however. Bilateral ties between Vietnam and the United States were strained by the designation of Vietnam as a currency

manipulator<sup>101</sup> and the investigation into the prices of Vietnamese timber exports to the United States.<sup>102</sup> This is a distressing legacy in US-Vietnam bilateral ties left by the Trump administration for the new Biden administration to deal with. But, given their shared strategic interests in the region, the two sides can be expected to resolve this dispute.

With Japan, Suga followed the steps of his predecessor Shinzo Abe in choosing Vietnam for his first foreign visit as prime minister. This indicates not only the great importance Japan places on its bilateral ties with the Southeast Asian nation, but also Vietnam's role and position in Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy. (By way of comparison, in 2017 President Donald Trump unveiled his administration's Indo-Pacific strategy in Da Nang, a coastal city in the central region of Vietnam, while attending the APEC Summit.)<sup>103</sup> During his Vietnam visit, Prime Minister Suga also made known his government's plan to promote Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision,<sup>104</sup> while emphasizing that Vietnam is a crucial stakeholder to achieving that vision.<sup>105</sup>

In July, Japan provided Vietnam with 36.6 billion yen (US\$347 million) to help the latter increase its maritime security capacity, including building six new patrol vessels.<sup>106</sup> During Prime Minister Suga's visit, the two countries signed an agreement to transfer Japanese defence technology to Vietnam.<sup>107</sup>

India is increasingly becoming one of Vietnam's most important strategic partners in the areas of economic development, defence and security. The key factor fuelling closer cooperation in these fields is their shared perceptions of a looming aggressive China.<sup>108</sup> The first half of 2020 witnessed an Indian-Chinese skirmish in Ladakh in north-western India that saw twenty Indian soldiers killed.<sup>109</sup> Meanwhile, Vietnam has also had to cope constantly with China's aggressive encroachment into its territories in the South China Sea.<sup>110</sup>

Vietnam and India have developed a traditional relationship since the era of President Ho Chi Minh and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.<sup>111</sup> The two countries had elevated their 2007 Strategic Partnership into a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016, signed a Joint Vision Statement on Vietnam-India Defence Cooperation for the period from 2015 to 2020 and recorded a two-way trade revenue of US\$10 billion in 2018. Both the bilateral economic relationship and defence and security cooperation progressed substantially in 2020.<sup>112</sup>

In February, Vietnam's vice president paid a visit to India and attended an official ceremony to launch direct air routes between cities in the two countries, which is expected to facilitate trade, tourism and people-to-people exchanges.<sup>113</sup> Though COVID-19 had an impact on pre-planned visits and face-to-face meetings, the second half of 2020 witnessed an active diplomatic agenda between the

senior officials of the two countries. Consecutive virtual dialogues saw a meeting of both foreign ministers in August,<sup>114</sup> the defence ministers in November<sup>115</sup> and the prime ministers in December.<sup>116</sup> In these meetings, Vietnam received a strong commitment from India for assistance to improve Vietnam's defence capacity. Notably, in December, the naval forces of the two countries conducted a "passage exercise" for the first time ever to boost maritime cooperation in the South China Sea.<sup>117</sup>

## Conclusion

The CPV closed its 14th Plenary of the Central Committee in mid-December 2020 without having reached a consensus on who would be granted the "special case" exception, which would have allowed such individuals to stay in power beyond the tenure of the 13th Congress.

Despite the impact of COVID-19, Vietnam made positive achievements in virtually all fields in 2020, except for its human rights record. Nevertheless, Secretary-General Trong has repeatedly warned that "there should be no self-complacency and nobody should self-satisfy with laurel wreath".<sup>118</sup> Certainly, Vietnam should expect more than a few challenges in 2021.

As scheduled, the 13th party congress will be followed by national elections, upon which a new National Assembly will be installed and many government agencies will experience reshuffles. The first challenge relates to how the changes in personnel at the senior levels will cause delays before the state-party apparatus will be able to run smoothly, even though the party has already determined future staffing arrangements. The second challenge will be the continued struggle against COVID-19. Vietnam will take a cautious approach about opening its doors to the outside world, including prospective foreign investors. This will likely have an impact on whether economic goals are achieved for 2021 or even for the entire tenure of the new National Assembly.

A third challenge will be the sustainability of the *đốt lò* campaign. The anti-corruption drive will undoubtedly continue if Secretary-General Trong is re-elected. But the campaign might not be as intense as it was in 2020 because the CPV will want to "catch the mice but keep the pot unbroken".<sup>119</sup> The fourth challenge, which will likely endure beyond 2021, is the South China Sea issue. Brunei will occupy the ASEAN chair in 2021. While Brunei is one of the six claimants in the South China Sea, it has adopted a rather quiet approach to the dispute. It is unknown, therefore, whether ASEAN under Brunei's chairmanship will continue to maintain a common voice and adopt the same collective approach

to the South China Sea issue as the grouping did under Vietnam in 2020. A weak voice and any compromise by ASEAN will certainly affect Vietnam's interests. This is a concern though not only for Vietnam but also for the other member states. The final challenge awaiting Vietnam is convincing the new American administration not to impose tariffs on Vietnamese exports following the USTR's designation of Vietnam as a currency manipulator. In addition, unlike during the Trump administration, which focused more on the bilateral trade balance, Vietnam's human rights records will be more closely scrutinized by the Biden administration. Many promising aspects of US-Vietnam strategic cooperation might be constrained if the focus turns to the alleged violations of human rights by the CPV party state.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr Charles Knight and Mr David Kozar for their kind proofreading and comments on early drafts of this chapter.

## Notes

1. Nguyen Phu Trong, "Phát biểu tại hội nghị trực tuyến cuối năm của chính phủ với lãnh đạo các tỉnh, thành phố trực thuộc trung ương" [Speech delivered at the year-end virtual conference of the government with leaders from provinces and cities under the central government], 30 December 2019, <https://nhandan.com.vn/tin-tuc-su-kien/phat-bieu-cua-tong-bi-thu-chu-tich-nuoc-nguyen-phu-trong-tai-hoi-nghi-truc-tuyen-cuoi-nam-cua-chinh-phu-voi-lanh-dao-cac-tinh-thanh-pho-truc-thuoc-t-u-446014/>.
2. See examples at <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/regional/2020/04/16/covid-19-vietnam-earns-accolades-for-punching-above-its-weight>; <https://m.baomoi.com/vietnam-diem-sang-chong-dich-covid-19-o-khu-vuc/c/37522943.epi>; <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-09-23/how-did-vietnam-get-on-top-of-coronavirus-yet-again/12683008>.
3. Mai Truong, "Vietnam's Communist Party Finds a Silver Lining in COVID-19", 28 March 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/vietnams-communist-party-finds-a-silver-lining-in-covid-19/>.
4. Nguyen Phu Trong, "Phát biểu tại hội nghị trực tuyến cuối năm của chính phủ với lãnh đạo các tỉnh, thành phố trực thuộc trung ương" [Speech delivered at the year-end virtual conference of the government with leaders from provinces and cities under the central government], 28 December 2020, <https://baochinhphu.vn/Tin-noi-bat/Toan-van-phat-bieu-cua-Tong-Bi-thu-Chu-tich-nuoc-Nguyen-Phu-Trong-tai-Hoi-nghi-Chinh-phu-voi-dia-phuong/418198.vgp>.
5. Ibid.
6. <https://www.dw.com/en/how-vietnam-is-winning-its-war-on-coronavirus/a-52929967>.



- See also Jacques Morisset and Dorsati H. Madani, “Taking Stock: From COVID-19 to Climate Change – How Vietnam Can Become the Champion of Green Recovery”, December 2020, <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/436501607981697037/taking-stock-from-covid-19-to-climate-change-how-vietnam-can-become-the-champion-of-green-recovery>.
7. International Monetary Fund, “Regional Economic Outlook (Asia and Pacific): Navigating the Pandemic: A Multispeed Recovery in Asia”, October 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/APAC/Issues/2020/10/21/regional-economic-outlook-apd>.
  8. Phạm Bình Minh, “Xây dựng nền ngoại giao toàn diện, hiện đại – phát biểu tại Hội nghị Tổng kết công tác năm 2020, phương hướng nhiệm vụ năm 2021 của Bộ ngoại giao” [Building a comprehensive and modern diplomacy – speech at the Review Conference of 2020 Work and Work Planning for 2021 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs], 11 January 2021, <https://baoquocte.vn/pho-thu-tuong-pham-binh-minh-xay-dung-nen-ngoai-giao-toan-dien-hien-dai-133708.html>.
  9. Elliot Waldman, “Are Tools of Repression Helping or Hindering the Response to COVID-19?”, 4 June 2020, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/28816/are-tools-of-repression-helping-or-hindering-the-response-to-covid-19>. For related discussions, see Adam Fforde, “Vietnam and COVID-19: More Mark (Zuckerberg) than Marx”, 29 October 2021, <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/vietnam-and-covid-19-more-mark-zuckerberg-than-marx/>.
  10. Hai Hong Nguyen, “The Future of Vietnam’s Anti-corruption Drive”, 12 January 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/01/12/the-future-of-vietnams-anti-corruption-drive/>.
  11. Hai Hong Nguyen, “Will Vietnam’s Anti-corruption ‘Blazing Furnace’ Heat up in 2020?”, 6 February 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/02/06/will-vietnams-anti-corruption-blazing-furnace-heat-up-in-2020/>.
  12. Nguyen Phu Trong, Speech at the National Review Meeting of the National Steering Committee for Anti-Corruption in the period 2013–20 in Hanoi, 12 December 2020, <https://noichinh.vn/tin-tuc-su-kien/tin-trung-uong/202012/cong-tac-dau-tranh-phong-chong-tham-nhung-dat-nhieu-ket-qua-toan-dien-thuc-su-da-tro-thanh-phong-trao-xu-the-308913/>.
  13. Sebastian Strangio, “‘Scorched Earth’: Vietnam Arrests Leading Dissident Activists and Blogger”, 8 October 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/scorched-earth-vietnam-arrests-leading-dissident-activist-and-blogger/>; Toan Le, “Dong Tam Land Dispute Exposes Vietnam’s Rights and Democracy Challenges”, 15 April 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/dong-tam-land-dispute-exposes-vietnams-rights-and-democracy-challenges/>.
  14. Hai Hong Nguyen, “Who Will Be Vietnam’s Next Party Boss?”, 18 November 2019, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/11/18/who-will-be-vietnams-next-party-boss/>.

15. Ibid. For more examples, see Le Hong Hiep, “General Secretary Trong’s Political Future: Stayin’ Alive”, 22 September 2020, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/commentaries/general-secretary-trongs-political-future-stayin-alive/>.
16. The “four pillars plus” refers to the five most powerful positions in the CPV’s hierarchy: the secretary-general, the state president, the prime minister, the chairperson of the National Assembly and the executive member of the Secretariat.
17. <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Bo-may-hanh-chinh/Quyét-dinh-1722-QĐ-TTg-2020-Danh-muc-bi-mat-nha-nuoc-cua-Dang-456651.aspx>.
18. David Hutt, “Battle Lines Drawn for Vietnam’s Party Congress”, 9 January 2021, <https://asiatimes.com/2021/01/battle-lines-drawn-for-vietnams-party-congress/>; Nguyen Khac Giang, “Vietnam’s 13 Congress Institutional Resilience or Institutional Decay?”, 7 January 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/vietnams-13th-congress-institutional-resilience-or-institutional-decay/>; David Brown, “Vietnam’s Communists Sort Out Leadership”, 23 December 2020, <https://www.asiasentinel.com/p/vietnams-communists-sort-out-leadership/>; <https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam-55604797>; <https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam-55526194>.
19. Hai Hong Nguyen, “Who Will Be Vietnam’s Next Party Boss?”, 18 November 2019, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/11/18/who-will-be-vietnams-next-party-boss/>.
20. See <https://plo.vn/thoi-su/chat-luong-bo-chinh-tri-ban-bi-thu-nhin-tu-cach-lam-nhan-su-956945.html>.
21. See <https://daihoidang.vn/sau-kinh-nghiem-rut-ra-tu-dai-hoi-dang-bo-truc-thuoc-trung-uong/926.vnp>.
22. See <https://baomoi.com/nhin-lai-67-dai-hoi-dang-bo-truc-thuoc-trung-uong-dau-an-chuyen-giao-the-he/c/27773815.epi>.
23. See <https://daihoidang.vn/sau-kinh-nghiem-rut-ra-tu-dai-hoi-dang-bo-truc-thuoc-trung-uong/926.vnp>.
24. Hai Hong Nguyen, “Will Vietnam’s Anti-corruption”.
25. See <http://baochinhphu.vn/Phap-luat/Bo-Cong-an-thong-bao-ket-qua-dieu-tra-vu-an-Nguyen-Duc-Chung/414731.vgp>.
26. See <https://laodong.vn/phap-luat/ong-nguyen-duc-chung-bi-tuyen-phat-5-nam-tu-861469.lđo>.
27. See <http://antt.nguoiduatin.vn/nguyen-chu-tich-ubnd-tp-ha-noi-nguyen-duc-chung-bi-khai-tru-khoi-dang-305311.htm>; <http://mnews.chinhphu.vn/story.aspx?did=416020>; <https://vnexpress.net/ong-nguyen-duc-chung-bi-de-nghi-khai-tru-dang-4201080.html>.
28. See [http://ubkttw.vn/tin-tuc-thoi-su/-/asset\\_publisher/bHGXXiPdpRC/content/thong-cao-bao-chi-ky-hop-49-cua-ubkt-trung-uong](http://ubkttw.vn/tin-tuc-thoi-su/-/asset_publisher/bHGXXiPdpRC/content/thong-cao-bao-chi-ky-hop-49-cua-ubkt-trung-uong); <https://tuoitre.vn/bo-chinh-tri-ky-luat-can-h-cao-ong-nguyen-van-binh-20190806231613543.htm>.
29. See <https://tuoitre.vn/bo-chinh-tri-can-h-cao-bi-thu-quang-ngai-le-viet-chu-20200613080953543.htm>.

30. See <https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/bo-chinh-tri-ky-luat-ong-trieu-tai-vinh-do-lien-quan-gian-lan-thi-cu-1170561.html>.
31. See <https://nld.com.vn/thoi-su-trong-nuoc/thong-bao-hoi-nghi-trung-uong-6-khoa-xi-2012101509282342.htm>.
32. Hai Hong Nguyen, “The Future of Vietnam’s”.
33. Alexander L. Vuving, “Vietnam in 2018: A Rent-Seeking State on Correction Course”, in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2019*, edited by Daljit Singh and Malcolm Cook (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019), pp. 375–93.
34. See <https://vietnamnet.vn/vn/thoi-su/chinh-tri/tong-bi-thu-dai-hoi-la-dip-sang-loc-can-bo-khong-so-thieu-nguoi-lam-553736.html>.
35. “The Plot thickens”, *The Economist*, 7 September 2013, <https://www.economist.com/china/2013/09/07/the-plot-thickens>; “Hunting Tigers”, *The Economist*, 7 September 2013, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2013/09/07/hunting-tigers>; BBC, “Charting China’s ‘Great Purge’ under Xi”, 22 October 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-41670162>.
36. Nguyen Phu Trong, speech at the National Review Meeting.
37. See <https://vietnamnet.vn/vn/thoi-su/chinh-tri/tong-bi-thu-dai-hoi-la-dip-sang-loc-can-bo-khong-so-thieu-nguoi-lam-553736.html>.
38. Human Rights Watch, “Vietnam in the World Report 2021: Events of 2020”, pp. 743–48, [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media\\_2021/01/2021\\_hrw\\_world\\_report.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2021/01/2021_hrw_world_report.pdf). For more details, see Human Rights Watch, “Vietnam: Crackdown on Peaceful Dissident Intensifies – New Waves of Arrest Ahead of the 13th Party Congress”, 19 June 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/19/vietnam-crackdown-peaceful-dissent-intensifies>; <http://www.boxitvn.net/2020/12/31/gioi-hoat-dong-dan-ap-nhan-quyen-viet-nam-2020-gia-tang/#more-74556>; <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/01/1081632>.
39. Nguyễn Phú Trọng, “Phát biểu tại Hội nghị Công an Toàn quốc lần thứ 73”, 15 January 2018, quoted in Nguyễn Phú Trọng, “Quyết tâm ngăn chặn và đẩy lùi tham nhũng” (NXB Chính trị Quốc gia Sự thật, 2019), pp. 75–88.
40. See <http://bocongan.gov.vn/tin-tuc-su-kien/tin-an-ninh-trat-tu/thong-bao-ve-vu-viec-gay-roi-trat-tu-cong-cong-va-chong-nguoi-thi-hanh-cong-vu-tai-xa-dong-tam-huyen-my-duc-thanh-pho-ha-noi-d22-t27112.html>.
41. See <http://hpsc.iwr.uni-heidelberg.de/hxphu/index.php?page=readwriting&w=ToiAcDongTam-20200211>.
42. See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-security-clash-idUSKBN1Z80HX>.
43. David Brown, “Vietnam’s Dong Tam Incident: The Curtain Falls, and Not in a Good Way”, 15 September 2020, <https://www.asiasentinel.com/p/vietnams-dong-tam-incident-the-curtain>.
44. See <http://en.bocongan.gov.vn/tintuc/Pages/news-events.aspx?ItemID=6430>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51105808>.

45. Pham Doan Trang and Will Nguyen, “Dong Tam Report”, September 2020, <https://www.luatkhoea.org/2020/09/bao-cao-dong-tam-bach-hoa-va-luu-tru/>.
46. Xuân Mai, “Vụ Đồng Tâm: Cảnh giác với những thông tin sai lệch trên không gian mạng”, 11 February 2020, <http://cand.com.vn/Chong-dien-bien-hoa-binh/Vu-Dong-Tam-Canh-giac-voi-nhung-thong-tin-sai-lech-tren-khong-gian-mang-581234/>.
47. Amnesty International, “Vietnam: Arrests and Social Media Crackdown Follow Deadly Clashes over Land”, 16 January 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/viet-nam-arrests-social-media-crackdown-deadly-clashes-land/>.
48. See <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=25680>.
49. Reporters Without Border, “State Violence v. Bloggers and Journalists”, 29 December 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/vietnam>.
50. See <https://www.nguoi-viet.com/viet-nam/nhan-quyen-viet-nam-72-nguoi-bi-bat-va-ket-an-nam-2020/>.
51. European Union, “Vietnam: Statement by the Spokesperson on the Sentencing of Three Journalists”, 6 January 2021, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage\\_en/91185/Vietnam:%20Statement%20by%20the%20Spokesperson%20on%20the%20sentencing%20of%20three%20journalists](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/91185/Vietnam:%20Statement%20by%20the%20Spokesperson%20on%20the%20sentencing%20of%20three%20journalists); Radio Free Asia (RFA), “US, EU Demand Release of Vietnamese RFA Blogger and Others Jailed For ‘Peaceful Expression’ of Views”, 6 January 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/demand-01062021170023.html/ampRFA>.
52. See <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Hanoi-police-arrest-the-dissident-writer-and-blogger-Pham-Chi-Thanh-50149.html>.
53. Committee to Project Journalists, “Journalist Pham Doan Trang Arrested on Anti-state Charges in Vietnam”, 7 October 2020, <https://cpj.org/2020/10/journalist-pham-doan-trang-arrested-on-anti-state-charges-in-vietnam/>; Amnesty International, “Vietnam: Human Rights Champion Arrested at Grave Risk of Torture”, 7 October 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/10/viet-nam-human-rights-champion-arrested-at-grave-risk-of-torture/>.
54. Committee to Project Journalist, “Vietnam Sentences 3 Independent Journalists to More Than 20 Years in Prison”, 5 January 2021, <https://cpj.org/2021/01/vietnam-sentences-3-independent-journalists-to-more-than-10-years-in-prison/>.
55. Kaylee Uland, “Torture of Political Prisoners Continues in Vietnam”, 9 November 2020, <https://www.asiasentinel.com/p/torture-of-political-prisoners-continues>; see a report: [https://the88project.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Torture-Report\\_final.pdf](https://the88project.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Torture-Report_final.pdf).
56. See “Lại kiêu ‘khóc thê’ sau phiên tòa”, 18 January 2021, <http://cand.com.vn/Chong-dien-bien-hoa-binh/Lai-kieu-khoc-thue-sau-phien-toa-627792/>; “Những luận điệu phi lý núp bóng nhân quyền”, 11 January 2021, <http://cand.com.vn/Chong-dien-bien-hoa-binh/Lai-kieu-khoc-thue-sau-phien-toa-627792/>.

57. Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnam: Arrest of Pham Doan Trang", Thayer Consultancy Background Brief, 8 October 2020.
58. Ibid.
59. Communist Party of Vietnam, Political Report of the 12th National Congress, 2016.
60. Ibid.
61. Nguyen Xuan Phuc, Prime Minister of Viet Nam, Keynote Speech on Vietnam's 2020 ASEAN Chairmanship, 6 January 2020, [https://www.asean2020.vn/web/asean\\_en/thong-diep-cua-thu-tuong](https://www.asean2020.vn/web/asean_en/thong-diep-cua-thu-tuong).
62. Nguyễn Minh Vũ, "Thứ trưởng Ngoại giao Việt Nam, trả lời phỏng vấn của VOV", VOV, 3 January 2021, <https://vov.vn/chinh-tri/doi-ngoai-viet-nam-2020-vuon-tam-va-toa-sang-827122.vov>.
63. See <https://asean.org/storage/2020/02/ASEAN-Chairmans-Statement-on-COVID-19-FINAL.pdf>; <https://asean.org/storage/2020/04/Final-Joint-Statement-of-the-Special-APT-Summit-on-COVID-19.pdf>; <https://asean.org/storage/2020/04/Final-Co-Chairs-Statement-for-the-Special-ASEAN-U.S.-Foreign-Ministers-Meeting-on-COVID-19.pdf>; <https://asean.org/storage/2020/04/AJ-EM-Joint-Statement-on-Economic-Resilience-in-Response-to-COVID-19-FI...pdf>.
64. See <https://asean.org/storage/2020/04/FINAL-Declaration-of-the-Special-ASEAN-Summit-on-COVID-19.pdf>; [https://asean.org/storage/53-Finalised-and-APPROVED-TOR\\_COVID-19-ASEAN-Response-Fund.pdf](https://asean.org/storage/53-Finalised-and-APPROVED-TOR_COVID-19-ASEAN-Response-Fund.pdf).
65. See <http://hanoitimes.vn/vietnam-commits-us5-million-to-asean-covid-19-medical-supply-reserves-314811.html>; [https://asean.org/storage/54-Finalised-and-APPROVED-TOR\\_ASEAN-Regional-Reserve-for-Medical-Supplies.pdf](https://asean.org/storage/54-Finalised-and-APPROVED-TOR_ASEAN-Regional-Reserve-for-Medical-Supplies.pdf).
66. See <https://asean.org/storage/2020/04/Final-Joint-Statement-of-the-Special-APT-Summit-on-COVID-19.pdf>.
67. See <https://asean.org/storage/2020/04/Final-Co-Chairs-Statement-for-the-Special-ASEAN-U.S.-Foreign-Ministers-Meeting-on-COVID-19.pdf>.
68. See <https://asean.org/storage/2020/06/Statement-of-ASEAN-Ru-SFMM-FINAL-1.pdf>.
69. See <https://asean.org/storage/2020/11/1-Final-Ha-Noi-Declaration-on-the-ASEAN-Communitys-Post-2025-Vision.pdf>.
70. See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/12/01/co-chairs-press-release-of-the-23rd-asean-eu-ministerial-meeting/>.
71. See <https://aseanvietnam.vn/post/cuba-colombia-nam-phi-tham-gia-hiep-uoc-than-thien-va-hop-tac-djong-nam-a>.
72. See <https://asean.org/storage/43-Chairmans-Statement-of-37th-ASEAN-Summit-FINAL.pdf>.
73. See <https://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/826460/pm-viet-nam-becomes-strong-trustworthy-mainstay-in-asean.html>.

74. See <http://baochinhphu.vn/Tin-noi-bat/Tong-Bi-thu-Chu-tich-nuoc-Nguyen-Phu-Trong-gui-thong-diep-toi-Dai-hoi-dong-LHQ/408535.vgp>.
75. See <http://baochinhphu.vn/Cac-bai-phat-bieu-cua-Thu-tuong/Thong-diep-cua-Thu-tuong-Nguyen-Xuan-Phuc-gui-phien-hop-cap-cao-Lien-Hop-Quoc/408259.vgp>.
76. See <https://www.qdnd.vn/doi-ngoai/doi-ngoai/thong-diep-cua-chu-tich-quoc-hoi-nguyen-thi-kim-ngan-tai-phien-hop-cap-cao-ky-niem-25-nam-hoi-nghi-the-gioi-lan-thu-iv-ve-phu-nu-639654>.
77. See <http://baochinhphu.vn/Hoat-dong-cua-lanh-dao-Dang-Nha-nuoc/Thong-diep-cua-Pho-Thu-tuong-Bo-truong-Ngoai-giao-Pham-Binh-Minh-gui-Phien-hop-cap-cao-LHQ/409381.vgp>.
78. Phan Anh, “Vietnam Elected Non-permanent UN Security Council Member for 2020-2021 Term”, 7 June 2019, <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnam-elected-non-permanent-un-security-council-member-for-2020-2021-term-3935313.html>.
79. See <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/security-council-ministerial-open-debate-un-charter>; <https://vnmission-newyork.mofa.gov.vn/en-us/News/ConsulateNews/Pages/Un-Charter.aspx>.
80. See the UNSC president’s statement at <https://undocs.org/en/S/PRST/2020/1>; UNSC Ministerial-Level Open Debate on the UN Charter, 9 January 2020, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14071.doc.htm>.
81. See <https://vietnam.un.org/en/97883-high-level-global-event-strengthening-womens-role-building-and-sustaining-peace-commitments>.
82. See <https://vnmission-newyork.mofa.gov.vn/en-us/News/ConsulateNews/Pages/Briefing-ASEAN.aspx>.
83. Robyn Modie (Australian Ambassador to Vietnam), “Vietnam’s Steady Leadership Has Reinforced ASEAN’s Pivotal Role in the Region”, 20 November 2020, <https://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/808975/vns-steady-leadership-has-reinforced-aseans-pivotal-role-in-the-region.html>.
84. See <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/75/27>.
85. Hai Hong Nguyen, “Asia: Regional Peace Threatened by China Amidst COVID-19”, 13 July 2020, <https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2020/07/13/the-global-impacts-of-covid-19/>.
86. See <https://asean.org/storage/2020/06/Chairman-Statement-of-the-36th-ASEAN-Summit-FINAL.pdf>; <https://asean.org/storage/43-Chairmans-Statement-of-37th-ASEAN-Summit-FINAL.pdf>.
87. See [https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/Final\\_Chairs-Statement-of-the-34th-ASEAN-Summit-rev.pdf](https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/Final_Chairs-Statement-of-the-34th-ASEAN-Summit-rev.pdf); <https://asean.org/storage/2019/11/Chairs-Statement-of-the-35th-ASEAN-Summit-FINAL.pdf>.
88. Huong Le Thu, “Vietnam Should Update its South China Sea Strategy”, 6 December 2018, <https://amti.csis.org/vietnam-should-update-south-china-sea-strategy/>.

89. See [https://usun.usmission.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/296/200602\\_KDC\\_ChinasUnlawful.pdf](https://usun.usmission.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/296/200602_KDC_ChinasUnlawful.pdf).
90. See [https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs\\_new/submissions\\_files/mys\\_12\\_12\\_2019/2020\\_09\\_16\\_GBR\\_NV\\_UN\\_001.pdf](https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/mys_12_12_2019/2020_09_16_GBR_NV_UN_001.pdf).
91. James Pearson, “Vietnam Challenges China’s Monopoly on Virus Diplomacy”, 10 April 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-vietnam-diplomacy/vietnam-challenges-chinas-monopoly-on-virus-diplomacy-idUSKCN21S0CH>.
92. Ralph Jennings, “Vietnam Using Mask Diplomacy to Fortify Foreign Relations”, 22 April 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/vietnam-using-mask-diplomacy-fortify-foreign-relations>; Carl Thayer, “Is Vietnam Taking a Leaf Out of China’s ‘Face Mask Diplomacy’ Playbook?”, 13 April 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/vietnam-maskdiplomacy-04132020092940.html>; John Pennington, “How Vietnam Is Making Gains through Face Mask Diplomacy”, 17 April 2020, <https://www.aseantoday.com/2020/04/how-vietnam-is-making-gains-through-face-mask-diplomacy/?lang=vi>.
93. See [https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news\\_view.htm?lang=e&Seq\\_Code=156375](https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news_view.htm?lang=e&Seq_Code=156375).
94. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-visits-south-korea-and-vietnam-pledging-to-work-together-in-virus-fight>.
95. See <https://www.vietnamuknetwork.org.uk/news/uk-vietnam-free-trade-agreement-2020/>.
96. See <https://www.state.gov/secretary-pompeo-travels-to-vietnam-to-demonstrate-support-for-a-strong-prosperous-and-independent-vietnam/>; <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/us-secretary-of-state-mike-pompeo-begins-official-visit-to-vietnam-4184224.html>; <https://www.state.gov/secretary-pompeos-meeting-with-vietnamese-prime-minister-phuc/>; <https://www.state.gov/secretary-pompeos-meeting-with-vietnamese-deputy-prime-minister-and-foreign-minister-minh/>.
97. See <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/us-national-security-advisor-seeks-to-expand-cooperation-with-vietnam-4195190.html>.
98. See <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/10/19/national/politics-diplomacy/vietnam-japan-yoshihide-suga/>.
99. Shi Jiangtao, “Vietnam’s Omission from Chinese Foreign Minister’s Southeast Asia Tour Tells a Story, Observers Say”, 16 January 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3118023/vietnams-omission-chinese-foreign-ministers-southeast-asia>.
100. See <https://vnexplorer.net/vietnam-us-exchange-congratulatory-messages-on-25-years-of-diplomacy-a202063919.html>; <https://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/749485/vietnam-us-leaders-exchange-congratulations-on-diplomatic-ties.html>; <http://news.chinhphu.vn/Home/VN-US-leaders-exchange-greetings-on-25th-anniversary-of-ties-normalization/20207/40732.vgp>.
101. Department of Treasury, “Report to Congress: Macro-Economic and Foreign Exchange

- Policies of Major Trading Partners of the United States”, December 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/206/December-2020-FX-Report-FINAL.pdf>. For more details, see Sebastian Strangio, “US Government Officially Labels Vietnam a Currency Manipulator”, 17 December 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/us-officially-labels-vietnam-a-currency-manipulator/>.
102. See <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11683>.
103. Robert O’Brien, “Statement on the Declassification of the United States Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific”, 5 January 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/OBrien-Expanded-Statement.pdf>. See the framework at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>.
104. Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga’s speech at the Vietnam-Japan University, “Building Together the Future of Indo-Pacific”, 19 October 2020, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/s\\_sa/sea1/vn/page3e\\_001070.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sea1/vn/page3e_001070.html).
105. For an analysis, see Sebastian Strangio, “In Vietnam’s Capital, Japanese PM Pushes Indo-Pacific Vision”, 20 October 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/in-vietnams-capital-japanese-pm-pushes-indo-pacific-vision/>; Malcolm Cook, David Engel, and Huong Le Thu, “Suga Signals Commitment to ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ with Vietnam and Indonesia Visits”, 2 November 2020, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/suga-signals-commitment-to-free-and-open-indo-pacific-with-vietnam-and-indonesia-visits/>.
106. See [https://www.jica.go.jp/english/news/press/2020/20200730\\_31\\_en.html](https://www.jica.go.jp/english/news/press/2020/20200730_31_en.html); <http://hanoitimes.vn/japan-helps-vietnam-improve-maritime-capacity-in-us347m-loan-313517.html>; <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/east-asia/article/3096865/japan-signs-deal-provide-vietnam-six-patrol-ships-amid-south>.
107. See <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2020/10/19/japan-to-export-defense-tech-to-vietnam-under-new-agreement/>.
108. See <https://www.voatiengviet.com/a/lien-minh-quan-su-viet-nam-an-do-dang-hinh-thanh-de-doi-dau-trung-quoc-tren-bien-dong/5574865.html>.
109. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53061476>.
110. See a sampling statement by the spokesperson of the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in protest against China’s violation of Vietnam’s sovereignty in the Spratly Islands, 26 March 2020, <http://baochinhphu.vn/doi-ngoai/yeu-cau-trung-quoc-ton-trong-chu-quyen-cua-viet-nam/391091.vgp>.
111. Vu Hong Van, “The Foundation of Vietnam and India Relation: Historical Values”, *Asian Social Science* 16, no. 1 (2020): 1–13.
112. Don McLain Gill, “Closer India-Vietnam Relations: Implications for Southeast Asia”, 28 November 2020, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/closer-india-vietnam-relations-implications-for-southeast-asia/>.
113. See <https://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/592201/viet-nam-india-treasure-bilateral-traditional-relationship.html>.



114. See <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-vietnam-agree-to-add-new-momentum-to-ties/articleshow/77749035.cms>.
115. See <https://theguardian.com/defence-ministers-of-india-and-vietnam-hold-talks-to-strengthen-defence-relations/>; <https://www.voatiengviet.com/a/an-do-giup-viet-nam-hien-dai-hoa-quan-doi-truoc-lo-ngai-ve-trung-quoc/5681721.html>.
116. See <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/india-vietnam-leaders-discuss-south-china-sea-stronger-defence-ties>.
117. See <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1683396>; <https://www.voatiengviet.com/a/viet-nam-an-do-tap-tran-chung-tren-bien-dong-truoc-lo-ngai-tq/5716096.html>; <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/indian-naval-ship-to-conduct-naval-exercise-with-vietnamese-navy-in-south-china-sea-2343323>.
118. Nguyen Phu Trong, “Phát biểu tại hội nghị trực tuyến cuối năm của chính phủ”.
119. Hai Hong Nguyen, “Fighting Corruption in Vietnam Requires Institutional Reforms”, 19 April 2017, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/04/19/fighting-corruption-in-vietnam-requires-institutional-reform/>.