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VIETNAM'S DEFENCE POLICY: Combining tradition with transformation

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Vietnam's defence policy and military structure had long been the subject of speculation by foreign observers, thanks to a tradition of secrecy that enveloped the mindset of its ruling communist government. This started to thaw after Vietnam joined ASEAN in 1995 and began participating in the ASEAN Regional Forum. In line with ARF deliberations on regional security and agreements on confidence-building measures, Vietnam made public its defence policy in 1998 with the release of a White Paper entitled "Vietnam –Consolidating National Defence, Safeguarding the Homeland." This was presented to the ARF with the aim of enhancing the emerging security dialogue in the forum and securing a better understanding of Vietnam's overall defence development, modernisation and posture so as to help confidence building and foster stability in the region.

In pursuance of this objective Vietnam's Defence Minister General Pham Van Tra delivered a public lecture on his country's defence policy during an official visit to Singapore in early April. It was the first time that a high defence official and military leader of Vietnam had spoken in the region about the imperatives of his country's security and defence posture. The lecture on 3 April 2004, under the auspices of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, made clear that Vietnam's defence policy and any programme of military modernisation must be in accord with the broader development of the national economy.

While proud of its origins and traditions as a guerrilla army and strongly determined to renew the lessons gained from three wars they fought during their long struggle for independence and unification (against the French, American and Chinese forces) the Vietnam People's Army was also being shaped and constrained by the realities of the domestic economy. While economic reforms, private sector development and consumer spending have all contributed to the overall growth of the Vietnamese economy of late, the high percentage of defence spending (a nominal average of 35% of total government expenditure over the past decade) was not sustainable. Recent defence reforms highlighted in the 1998 White Paper represent an attempt to redress this imbalance.

In his lecture Gen Tra underlined this transformation, highlighting the 75% reduction in the regular armed force component (to around 48,000 active soldiers) since 1980, and indicating a move towards a core of reserves and militias. Vietnam now maintains a local force reserve of some 5 million soldiers, comprising an urban-based "people's self-defence force" and a rural "people's militia". He outlined a strategy called "all people's defence" which envisages defence self-reliance at district and provincial levels across the country. General Tra indicated that this "people's war" doctrine, as demonstrated successfully several times in Vietnam's recent history, still forms the core of Vietnam's defence posture.

Modest Modernisation

As for the future, Vietnam appears cognisant of the increasing requirement for defence transformation that has arisen in light of the so-called “revolution in military affairs” over the past decade. Despite limited resources, Gen Tra said Vietnam was seeking to improve the training and development of its military officers through a combination of civil and military education, and improving doctrine to reflect the changing emphasis on technology in war. Both these “soft” factors have proven to be decisive in any broad attempt to modernise armed forces. It is significant that Vietnam has picked up what might be one of the “real” lessons of the recent Gulf War; that an emphasis on superior levels of training and education for officers and soldiers alike is imperative for any nation seeking to decisively employ military force.

According to Gen Tra, Vietnam is also selectively acquiring modern weapons for air defence and the navy and new communications, command and control systems. The most significant recent purchases (according to military journals) include the first batch of SU30MK multi-role fighters from Russia (in addition to its existing fleet of SU22 fighter-bombers), PZL M28 maritime patrol aircraft from Poland, and the planned acquisition of dual-use military communications satellites from Israel. These purchases reflect Vietnam’s high priority for air-defence and air-superiority, followed by a recognised need to improve the ‘networking’ of services and combat units.

Defence Relations

Second in importance to force modernisation has been a concerted effort to expand international cooperation and improve external relations. Gen Tra believed that such efforts would improve the peace and security of the region, if conducted on the basis of equality, mutual respect and independence. Vietnam had been expanding its international defence relations beyond a traditional partner, Russia, and even outside ASEAN, with new engagement activities planned with countries such as Australia and Japan.

On Vietnam’s defence relations with China and America, Gen Tra was conservatively optimistic. Vietnam and China were friendly neighbours cooperating in many areas, including defence. Trade and economic ties were increasing, and so were exchanges of visits between their defence and military establishments, aimed at strengthening bilateral friendship and maintaining security and stability in the region. Vietnam is striving to consolidate friendship and cooperation with China for the mutual prosperity of the two countries and people, and to promote regional stability.

Vietnam’s relations with the United States has developed significantly since the normalisation of ties in 1995, on the basis of mutual respect for independence, sovereignty, national integrity, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit. Defence cooperation has traditionally covered three areas: search for wartime MIAs on both sides; humanitarian de-mining assistance; and a military medical programme. They are also having exchanges of military delegations at various levels to further cooperation on humanitarian issues and consequences of war, such as decontamination of toxic chemicals and extension of a military medical service.

Regional Issues

Gen Tra was forthright about the future use of the military bases at Cam Ranh Bay. Since the withdrawal of Russian naval elements from that base in July 2002 there has been speculation that the naval base might be offered to another country. He said the airbase there has now been opened for domestic civilian use and, even international flights could land there. The naval base had been given to the Vietnamese Navy to be used as one of their key naval facilities. Gen Tra made clear that Vietnam's policy was not to cooperate with any country in the future operation or use of the naval base at Cam Ranh Bay. However they are ready to allow foreign ships to use the naval base in cases of search and rescue during maritime accidents or tropical storms.

In response to a question about Vietnam's sending tourists to the Spratlys, Gen Tra reaffirmed its strong stance on the issue. Vietnam has persistently declared that the Spratlys and Paracels were Vietnam's territory. Vietnam currently occupies 31 of the islets in the Spratlys, while the other five claimants held only a few. The Paracels continue to be under Chinese occupation. In accordance with the ASEAN Spirit and the Code of Conduct on Spratlys, General Tra stated that Vietnam would not use force in settling any conflict over the islands. It would seek to maintain the status quo in the region. However, Vietnam reserved the right to take tourists to Spratlys, as Malaysia had previously done, as it considers the islands to be part of Vietnamese territory.

Defence Ministers Meeting

To another question regarding an ASEAN Defence Ministers meeting, Gen Tra considered such a meeting to be necessary in order to exchange views on matters of mutual concern. Vietnam was willing to take part in such a meeting. The ASEAN Chiefs of Defence Forces have held meetings that Vietnam's Chief of General Staff had attended and defence officials have also attended meetings in parallel with the ARF. He therefore supported the idea of an ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting and stated he would be willing to attend it.

Conclusion

Gen Tra presented not only a clear picture of Vietnam's current defence policy but also conveyed a desire to be more open about Vietnam's political system and regional outlook. His candid comments on several contentious issues enabled a clearer understanding of Vietnam's defence relations and foreign policy posture. His explanation of the direction and nature of Vietnam's defence modernisation process made clear that while moving towards a smaller technologically capable regular force, Vietnam would still rely on a core of reserves and militias to meet its traditional strategic concerns with national unity and sovereignty. While it is unlikely that Vietnam will seek to enter into any type of defence or security alliance in the near future it is certainly trying to establish a reputation as a traditional, yet transformative, player interested in maintaining stability in the region.

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