

## **“VIETNAM IS A FRIEND” - A NEW GUIDELINE IN VIETNAM’S FOREIGN POLICY**

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***Abstract:** “Vietnam is a friend” to countries in the international community is a constituent element of our nation’s foreign policy. It is the result of inheriting our ancestors’ diplomatic traditions of humanity, peace, respect for reason, justice, and righteousness throughout history. This viewpoint represents the crystallization of Hồ Chí Minh’s distinctive diplomatic thought, which has been continuously supplemented and developed by our Party through successive Congresses in the Đổi mới period, with the goal of combining national strength with the strength of the times, thereby vigorously mobilizing resources to build a prosperous and happy country.*

***Keywords:** Vietnam is a friend, international relations, Vietnam’s foreign policy.*

### **1. “Vietnam is a Friend” – The process of development of understanding in Vietnam’s foreign policy**

“Vietnam is a friend” to countries in the international community is, in essence, a consistent spirit and one of the guiding principles of Vietnam’s foreign policy from history to the present.

In history, when dealing with relations between Vietnam and other countries, especially with neighboring nations, our forefathers consistently upheld the principle of “harmony within, amity without,” prioritizing “domestic peace and external stability”. This not only ensured border security and national independence and sovereignty, but also helped expand trade relations

with the rest of the world. In his *Binh Thư Yếu Lược* (Essential Military Treatise), Trần Hưng Đạo emphasized that harmony was the finest principle in governing and in military affairs: if there is harmony within the country, the need for military force is reduced; if there is harmony on the borders, there will be no fear of alarms. Phan Huy Chu, author of *Lịch Triều Hiến Chương Loại Chí* (Categorized Records of the Institutions of Successive Dynasties) (1821), summed this up into a great lesson: “In governing a country, maintaining amity with neighbors is of

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paramount importance”. Practicing this principle was, above all, for the interests of the nation: “using foreign policy to prevent and deter war, or to bring war to an end as quickly as possible in the most advantageous position; diplomacy must always serve the internal cause of nation-building and defense”. These are *timeless philosophies of our ancestors* that remain profoundly valuable today.

Continuing this distinctive foreign policy tradition humane, peace-loving, respecting *justice, fairness, and righteousness* President Ho Chi Minh, throughout his life, tirelessly contributed to fostering understanding among peoples of the world and to promoting friendship between Vietnam and all democratic countries. It can be affirmed that in the Ho Chi Minh era, Vietnam’s diplomatic thought was elevated to a new height, and the foreign policy of the Vietnamese revolution was fundamentally established. As the former Minister of Foreign Affairs Nguyen Dy Nien put it, this was “a system of principles, viewpoints, and conceptions on global and contemporary issues, on international lines, strategies, tactics, foreign policies, and Vietnam’s diplomacy in the modern time/period” (Nguyen Dy Nien 2002: 89).

In his thought, Ho Chi Minh consistently affirmed that Vietnam seeks to “make friends with all democratic countries and harbor no enmity with anyone” (Ho Chi Minh 2011, vol.5: 256), “on the principle of equality and mutual

benefit,” striving for “more friends, fewer enemies,” and being “ready to establish diplomatic and commercial relations with all countries” (Ho Chi Minh 2011, vol.10: 317), regardless of political regimes. He wrote: “The Vietnamese people are convinced that all global disputes can be resolved peacefully; convinced that countries with different social systems and ideologies can still coexist peacefully” (Ho Chi Minh 2011, vol.10: 12). Thus, he asserted: “The Government’s foreign policy is nothing more than friendship with all democratic countries of the world to preserve peace” (Ho Chi Minh 2011, vol.5: 39).

From another perspective, according to Ho Chi Minh, “being a friend” was not only to seek support and assistance from the international community, but also to recognize clearly that “helping friends is helping ourselves”. At the same time, Vietnam must identify its responsibility to support and assist other nations and fulfill its international obligations, especially valuing friendship with neighboring countries those sharing borders and others in the region.

Thus, “being a friend” is a guiding principle within Ho Chi Minh’s diplomatic thought. It is the “harmonious combination of patriotism, national culture, and Vietnam’s diplomatic traditions with the cultural essence and diplomatic experience of the world”. At its core, this thought always emphasized the goals of *national independence,*

*the spirit of peace and friendship*, the use of diplomacy to avert conflict, and alignment with global realities, enabling Vietnam to integrate into the current of the times...”. National independence must be closely linked with socialism; self-reliance and resilience must be associated with international solidarity; national strength must be combined with the strength of the times; attention must be given to building friendly relations with all countries, especially neighboring countries, traditional friends, and progressive, peace-loving peoples around the world” (Government Electronic Newspaper, 2021).

Continuing the national tradition and creatively applying Ho Chi Minh’s diplomatic thought, Vietnam’s foreign policy has been continuously supplemented, developed, and adapted to each stage of the revolution. Within this, the principle of “Vietnam is a friend” to all countries in the international community has also been adjusted appropriately in different historical periods.

After the end of the U.S. invasion, although Vietnam expressed goodwill in establishing good relations with the United States on the basis of mutual respect, the U.S. maintained its embargo policy, creating enormous difficulties for the country’s restoration and development after the war. At the 6th National Congress of the Party, in the spirit of “looking directly at the truth and telling the truth”, the Party

acknowledged the country’s social and economic weaknesses frankly. The situation of economic embargo and political isolation created great risks that threatened national security and independence. This was a major disadvantage for Vietnam’s cause of socialist construction.

In that context, the Communist Party of Vietnam issued Resolution No. 13/NQ-TW (6th Congress) in May 1988 “On Foreign Policy and Tasks in the New Situation.” The Resolution set forth the policy of “more friends, fewer enemies” and “expanding relations with all countries on the principle of peaceful coexistence” (Communist Party of Vietnam 1987: 225), in order to win support from international friends and public opinion worldwide. The aim was, on one hand, to divide and weaken the opposition forces, defeating their attempts to economically and politically isolate Vietnam; and on the other, to actively shift the struggle from a state of confrontation to one of both struggle and cooperation with other countries for common development. With this new diplomatic approach, Vietnam gradually emerged from the embargo and isolation, opening relations with many partners, thereby creating a new situation for renovation, integration, national development, and defense. Vietnam normalized relations with China (1991) and the United States (1995), promoted friendly relations with neighboring countries

and partners, actively joined ASEAN (1995), and signed a Cooperation Agreement with the EU (1995). At the same time, Vietnam gradually joined many important regional and international organizations. Thanks to the Party’s wise leadership across all areas, including its sound and open foreign policy, the country overcame its socio-economic crisis, laying the groundwork for Vietnam to enter the stage of accelerating industrialization and modernization under socialist orientation.

From the 7th National Congress (June 1991) to the 8th National Congress (1996), Vietnam continued to pursue an open foreign policy aimed at maintaining peace, expanding friendship and cooperation, and creating favorable conditions to serve both national interests and the global struggle for peace, independence, democracy, and social progress, based on the principle of “peaceful coexistence”; “cooperation, equality, and mutual benefit with all countries, regardless of differences in political and social systems” (Communist Party of Vietnam 1991: 146).

To achieve this goal, the Communist Party of Vietnam declared to the world: “Vietnam wants to be a friend to all countries in the world community, striving for peace, independence, and development” (Communist Party of Vietnam 1991: 147). This was the message Vietnam wished to convey

to the international community in the spirit of friendship and cooperation for common development. At the same time, it continued to implement the line of combining national strength with the strength of the times, domestic strength with international strength, and harmonizing tradition with modernity to serve the cause of building and defending the socialist homeland.

By the 9th National Congress (April 2001), the world was witnessing breakthroughs in science and technology, particularly information technology, which spurred globalization and created new opportunities for development. Domestically, the Party identified both difficulties and challenges in national construction and defense, while also recognizing that Vietnam’s regional and global standing remained limited. Therefore, it was necessary to be more proactive in international relations, ready to establish friendships with all countries, including those that had been former “adversaries” and with different ideological perspectives, in order to enhance Vietnam’s position in the international arena. Affirming this view, the Communist Party of Vietnam clearly stated: “Vietnam is ready to be a friend and a reliable partner of all countries in the international community, striving for peace, independence, and development” (Communist Party of Vietnam 2001: 119). Vietnam would proactively integrate into the regional and global economy, guided

by the spirit of maximizing internal strength, enhancing the effectiveness of international cooperation, ensuring independence, self-reliance, and a socialist orientation, and safeguarding national interests. In this, Vietnam valued and developed friendly, cooperative relations with socialist countries and neighboring states; continued to expand relations with traditional friends; and promoted diverse relations with developed countries and international organizations.

From the 10th to the 13th National Congress of the Party, Vietnam's foreign policy was adjusted, shifting from being "ready to be a friend" to "being a friend, a reliable partner, and an active, responsible member of the international community" (see: Communist Party of Vietnam 2006: 112; Communist Party of Vietnam 2011: 83; Communist Party of Vietnam 2016: 153; Communist Party of Vietnam 2021: 162). This adjustment in expression reflects Vietnam's proactive and positive approach in "building trust" with international friends through sincerity, understanding, and the continuous cultivation of friendly relations with other countries, thereby generating mutual confidence and trust as the basis for long-term, sustainable cooperation. Through this, the nation's position has been elevated, and diplomatic relations with countries in the region and the world have improved.

## 2. "Vietnam is a Friend" – New

### **features and contributions to the international community**

The policy of "*Vietnam is a friend*" clearly demonstrates Vietnam's open foreign policy, with the desire to proactively establish and strengthen friendly relations and cooperative development with all countries, with the aims of:

i) winning the sincere support and assistance of friends and the international community in the service of the *Đổi mới* process under socialist orientation;

ii) being ready to support and assist other countries, especially neighboring countries and those in the region, to achieve common development on the principle of equality, cooperation, and mutual benefit;

iii) fulfilling its international obligations and responsibilities on the basis of the fundamental principles of the United Nations Charter and international law.

Some key new features of the "Vietnam is a friend" policy and its contributions to the international community can be summarized as follows:

*First, clearly defining Vietnam's position in international relations.*

The transition from "wanting to be a friend" to "ready to be a friend", and finally to the principle of "being a friend," illustrates the shift from aspiration and a passive stance to a proactive, positive posture in establishing

friendly relations with countries in the international community. It marks a change from merely participating to actively contributing to the building and shaping of international relations, depending on Vietnam’s capabilities and conditions. Consequently, Vietnam’s stature and position in the global arena have become broader and deeper than in previous periods. This has been demonstrated through Vietnam’s position in the foreign policies of many countries, especially major powers and those playing important roles in issues related to Vietnam’s security and development interests, as well as within multilateral cooperation frameworks. In November 2017, during his visit to Vietnam, Chinese President Xi Jinping affirmed that China considers Vietnam a priority in its regional foreign policy. Russian President Vladimir Putin, in Russia’s new foreign policy doctrine, identified Vietnam as one of the three most important strategic partners of Russia in the Asia-Pacific region. India has repeatedly affirmed that Vietnam is a key pillar in its “Act East” policy. The United States has also affirmed that Vietnam, along with Indonesia and Singapore, is a new security partner it values in its regional strategy.

*Second, new perceptions of the global context, especially regarding the nature, mechanisms of operation, and new factors affecting the development process of both Vietnam and the world.*

The new global context, established

after the Cold War, has shifted from confrontation to dialogue, cooperation, and common development, even among countries with different ideologies. This has occurred alongside globalization, deep international integration, and the rapid development of science and technology, particularly the Fourth Industrial Revolution, as well as challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this new context, Vietnam has had conditions to mobilize both internal and external resources for national development, especially in the economic field. Currently, Vietnam maintains economic and trade relations with 230 countries and territories, with a total import-export turnover of approximately USD 600 billion—roughly 120 times greater than in the early years of *Đổi mới*. Vietnam has actively and positively participated in multilateral and regional economic institutions, joining the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC), and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Vietnam has also participated in numerous bilateral and multilateral FTAs, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), and the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA)...To date, Vietnam has signed 15 regional and

bilateral FTAs (13 of which are already in effect, with 3 under negotiation), including two “new-generation” FTAs. On this basis, Vietnam has established trade relations with nearly all of the world’s most important partners. This presents favorable opportunities for Vietnam to promote bilateral trade and investment exchanges, as well as to deepen regional and global economic integration (Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, 2021, p. 317). As a result, Vietnam has been able to seize opportunities and garner material and moral support from other countries, regardless of ideological differences, while also proactively and flexibly handling relationships in the face of today’s complex and unpredictable international developments. All of this is aimed at the goals of independence, self-reliance, peace, friendship, cooperation, and development on the basis of equality and mutual benefit.

*Third, renewal/renovation in foreign policy thinking.*

The major transformations in international relations during the final decades of the 20th century required comprehensive innovation in thinking, including foreign policy thinking. Vietnam made a critical shift from the binary “friend–enemy” mindset to the approach of “more friends, fewer enemies”, and then further to the broader orientation of “Vietnam is a friend.” This also involved differentiating between “partners” and “adversaries/

objects of struggle”, while recognizing that within partners, there may be elements of adversaries/objects, and within adversaries/objects, there may be elements of partners.

On this basis of renewed foreign policy thinking, Vietnam has established a broad network of strategic and comprehensive partnerships with major countries (including 3 countries with special relations, 6 comprehensive strategic partners, 12 strategic partners, and 12 comprehensive partners). This has allowed Vietnam to expand its circle of friends, foster trust, maximize the “partnership” dimension, and minimize the “adversaries/objects of struggle” dimension; to strengthen commonalities and reduce differences; to defend national interests while at the same time promoting friendly relations with partners, regardless of ideological systems. As a result, Vietnam’s foreign relations have not only been broadened but also elevated to a higher level, going deeper and serving the cause of building and defending the socialist Fatherland more effectively.

*Fourth, the principle of “being a friend” has made important contributions to conflict resolution, the expansion of foreign relations, and the mobilization of external resources for national development.*

With the orientation of “being a friend, a reliable partner, and an active, responsible member of the international community” (Communist

Party of Vietnam 2021: 162), Vietnam has proactively resolved many contradictions, prevented and addressed potential problems early and from afar, and flexibly managed arising issues in a timely manner. This has helped prevent international relations from falling into prolonged tension or disruption, as in earlier periods, while simultaneously garnering significant global resources. Whereas in the past, the goal was to serve the struggle for national liberation and reunification, today it serves the cause of *Đổi mới* (renovation), industrialization, and modernization for rapid and sustainable development.

The orientation of “being a friend, a reliable partner, and an active, responsible member of the international community” represents a flexible and skillful approach, and a contribution from Vietnam to the world in addressing contradictions and resolving conflicts many of which remain acute in different regions that international friends can draw upon in appropriate circumstances.

*Fifth, with this orientation, Vietnam has clearly defined its role, responsibilities, and international obligations.*

With new strength and position, the guiding thought of the Communist Party of Vietnam emphasizes that Vietnam must not only be proactive and active in international integration but also demonstrate a high sense of responsibility in assisting and supporting friendly countries within

its means especially traditional friends and neighboring countries. Vietnam has also actively participated in addressing regional and global issues with the spirit of “helping friends is helping oneself”. For instance, in times of natural disasters in some countries, Vietnam has extended timely support within its capacity. Most recently, during the global Covid-19 pandemic, despite limited resources, Vietnam, with a spirit of solidarity and friendship - “sharing both sweetness and hardship” - provided medical equipment to several friendly nations to aid their pandemic response. Such acts of solidarity and friendship in times of difficulty have been recognized and highly valued by the international community.

Although Vietnam upholds national interests as the highest priority, it has not fallen into selfish nationalism. Instead, it has consistently affirmed that foreign policy must be grounded in the fundamental principles of the United Nations Charter and international law. Vietnam has clearly defined its responsibilities and obligations as an active and responsible member of the international community, thereby undertaking concrete and effective activities to contribute to peace, cooperation, development, and progress worldwide.

Vietnam has successfully hosted many major international conferences and fulfilled important international responsibilities, such as serving as a

non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the 2020–2021 term; Chair of ASEAN; host of ASEM and APEC Summits; organizer of the World Economic Forum on ASEAN; Vice President of the 77th UN General Assembly; member of the UN Human Rights Council for 2023–2025; member of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO); and member of the International Law Commission for the 2023–2027 term, among others. Vietnam has also deployed hundreds of officers and soldiers to UN peacekeeping operations in Africa. On many important international issues, Vietnam’s voice, initiatives, and approaches marked by reason, fairness, and humanity have been met with agreement and support

from the international community. As a result, Vietnam’s position and reputation continue to be elevated globally.

In conclusion, “Vietnam is a friend” is a fundamental component of the nation’s foreign policy line. It inherits and develops the humane, peace-loving diplomatic traditions of the Vietnamese people, while embodying Ho Chi Minh’s distinctive diplomatic thought and the Communist Party of Vietnam’s consistent, innovative vision. Over nearly 40 years of *Đổi mới*, this orientation has contributed significantly to raising Vietnam’s international stature, expanding cooperation, and promoting peace, independence, democracy, and development on the basis of equality and mutual benefit within the global community.

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