

Vietnam's Defence Policy and Its Impact on Foreign Relations

Carlyle A. Thayer

This paper traces the evolution of Vietnam's defence policy after the settlement of the Cambodian conflict and collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 to the present. In this period Vietnam expanded its defence policy from protection of national sovereignty to embrace comprehensive security. Economics took pride of place and Vietnam's armed forces were pared down and starved of funds. Vietnamese foreign policy was captured in such catchy slogans as 'multidirectional foreign policy' and 'making friends with all countries.' Vietnam achieved success after success in its quest to integrate its economy with the global economy. This paper presents a case study of Vietnam's relations with China and argues that there is an emerging contradiction between Vietnam's foreign and defence policies. Vietnam seeks to leverage its external relations with China in order to boost economic development, yet Vietnamese plans to develop its maritime zone in the South China Sea has provoked a Chinese counter-reaction designed to scuttle this initiative. Vietnam now faces a significant challenge to its national sovereignty. This paper argues there are signs that Vietnam is developing a modest deterrent capacity in the South China Sea and employing defence diplomacy in order to bolster its negotiating position vis-à-vis China.