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THEORISING FOREIGN POLICY AND IR IN VIETNAM: A CASE FOR A NON-WESTERN IRT?

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Abstract. The article is devoted to revealing some of the key concepts pertaining to International Relations Theories (IRT) suggested by the leading Vietnamese scholars at present. While claiming no comprehensiveness with regard to the coverage, the paper unveils some of the circumstances that served as a background for the evolution of International Relations (IR) as a discipline in Vietnam with a specific focus on the indigenous school(s) of thought. In particular, a Vietnamese conceptualisation of the middle power theory is of interest, being relevant not only in terms of advancing the methodological constructs but also for formulating – even if indirectly – Vietnam’s foreign policy in practice. On the whole, noteworthy is the creative adaptation of Ho Chi Minh’s thoughts to the contemporary intricacies of international politics. Findings show that while some Vietnamese groundwork in IR theories is typical of non-Western scholarship on the whole, it manifests a certain degree of uniqueness in that it relies on a combination of Marxist-Leninist doctrines and Ho Chi Minh’s postulates with both characteristically Asian notions (e.g. “bamboo diplomacy”) and theoretical developments originating in the Global West (such as the concept of a “middle power”).

Key words: Vietnam, International Relations Theories, non-Western IR Theories

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ВЬЕТНАМСКИЕ ТЕОРИИ ВНЕШНЕЙ ПОЛИТИКИ И МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ: ПРИМЕР НЕЗАПАДНОЙ ШКОЛЫ ТМО?

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена раскрытию ряда ключевых концептов теорий международных отношений (ТМО), предлагаемых ведущими вьетнамскими учёными на современном этапе. Не претендуя на всеобъёмность охвата материала, автор освещает некоторые обстоятельства, послужившие фоном для развития международных отношений (МО) как дисциплины во Вьетнаме с отдельным фокусом на местных научных школах. В частности, интерес представляет вьетнамская концептуализация теории средних держав, релевантная не только с точки зрения методологических выкладок, но и для практического формулирования вьетнамской внешней политики, пусть и косвенным образом. В целом, можно отметить и творческую адаптацию идей Хо Ши Мина к современным особенностям международной проблематики. Выводы показывают, что, хотя вьетнамские разработки теорий МО типичны для «незападной» науки в принципе, они обнаруживают определённую степень уникальности в том, что основаны на сочетании учений марксизма-ленинизма и постулатов Хо Ши Мина с характерно азиатскими понятиями (напр., «бамбуковая дипломатия») и теоретическими построениями, берущими своё начало на глобальном Западе (такими, как концепция «средней державы»).

Ключевые слова: Вьетнам, теории международных отношений, незападные ТМО

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Introduction

A heated debate on whether a non-Western International Relations Theory (NWIRT) is possible – or a valid concept at all – has been ongoing for decades. There are conflicting (if not downright antipodean) viewpoints as to the gist and definition of NWIRT. While some critics are sceptical of the “Eurocentric”/Western lens presumably incapable of explaining processes in the rest of the world, the others suggest eclectically merging the existing perspectives into a Global IRT, thus reconciling the debate by embracing the non-Western narratives.

A great deal of researchers delving into the phenomenon of NWIRT habitually put the Chinese thought in the centre of their investigation, which could rightfully be considered an oversimplification. Still, academics originating from Asian countries – including the P.R.C. – are able to generate unconventional theoretical constructs, from Yan Xuetong’s moral realism to modern iterations of the mandala theory. As noted by B. Buzan and A. Acharya, the emergence of national IR schools in Asia is not inconceivable in principle [Acharya, Buzan 2007], and based on this postulate one can hypothesise that Vietnam is no exception. While discriminating between the theoretical foundations of

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foreign policy (FP) as a general line of a country's behaviour internationally, on the one hand, and IRT as a discipline aiming to explain the communication among the actors of world politics, it is imperative to be aware of the intrinsic interdependence between the two notions.

Regardless of the pessimistic assessment expressed by some scholars addressing the issue of theorising IR in the Southeast Asia (SEA) [Rüland 2016], recent decades have witnessed concrete progress in this field. However, compared to the other nations of the subregion, Vietnam's thought on IR is frustratingly underexplored. While research on domestic IRT in Malaysia or the Philippines is widely available in English, not much is known about how Vietnamese pundits and diplomats view IR both as an academic discipline and practical activity. The present paper, as such, might be regarded as an attempt to bridge the said gap.

It is no wonder that the study and development of IRT in Vietnam was incentivised thanks to the state-building process reinvigorated after the national reunification of 1975–1976, and most of all the Renovation policy launched at the 6th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) in 1986. While the initial stage was characterised by working out a more or less independent vision of international politics based on Ho Chi Minh's doctrine, with the lapse of time Vietnam, intensifying its ties, grew to adopt and reprocess concepts peculiar to Western theories. Such a shift was caused in a large part by the turn from “defensive socialism” [Chong, Hamilton-Hart 2008] to openness in an attempt to boost the national economy by promoting trade and attracting investment. This urgent need for creating stronger theoretical foundations of Vietnam's participation in the IR was underlined in a recent statement by the CPV Central Committee's Commission for External Relations.

The following section thus deals with an account of the prior studies of the problem under discussion conducted by both Vietnamese and international scholars to evaluate how the scientific community has been tracking the evolution of IRT in Vietnam.

Literature review

It stands to reason that most of the articles and book chapters dealing with the subject matter denoted are of relatively recent origin, for the science of IR – and all the more the abstract art of theorising it – is deeply intertwined with the agency of a nation-state, i.e. the capacity to practice its independent FP in the international milieu. Naturally, rich history of Vietnam as a separate entity dates back to centuries ago, as does its diplomatic practice: some allude to the Hùng King era, or the Hồng Bàng period, that started as early as the 3rd Millennium BC [Vu Trong Lam]. At the same time, IRT as a discipline in its contemporary sense did not appear until the 20th century in the world science, let alone in Vietnam.

Nonetheless, the significance and relevance of Vietnam's role in IRT – Western or not – is underscored in a number of papers. As such, the term “Asia-Pacific” itself was allegedly coined as an aftermath of the Vietnam war. History of Vietnam's participation in the IR as a full-fledged actor is deemed to pose valuable empirical material to be reinterpreted and reexplained through the prism of non-Western optics. One of such case studies important for seasoned theorists is the withdrawal of the Soviet military from the air and naval base Cam Ranh [Acharya 2008: 62] as a harbinger of “power vacuum” defining the reconfiguration of the regional security architecture in the Asia-Pacific as a part of the post-Cold-war world order.

E. Palmujoki [1997] traces back the theoretical origins of Vietnam's global stance as inspired by the local interpretation of Marxism-Leninism. The author chronologically divides Vietnam's independent existence in the Cold War era into the stages of “Avant-Garde Foreign Policy” with its

two camps doctrine (1975–1978), isolation/formalism characterised by the Indochina doctrine (1979–1985) and the “doctrinal unity” attained after the reforms announced in 1986.

Revising a more contemporary epoch, A. Chong and N. Hamilton-Hart [2008], juxtapose Vietnam’s experience in theorising and teaching IR with that of other nations in SEA. The researchers testify to that Vietnam’s historical grievances (i.e. immediate military intervention on part of Western countries) could not but affected the study of IR in Vietnam. As argued by the authors, Vietnamese scholars pay close attention to mutual support lent by the neighbours in the region to each other.

A project by Russian International Affairs Council aimed at creating a guidebook for a more profound understanding of NWIRT covers some of those in general terms [Pyatachkova, Novikov 2020]. In a chapter dedicated to Southeast Asian IRT, the authors mostly focus on Malaysia as a case study while Vietnam is only mentioned once.

According to A.I. Kozinets [2016], the traditional conventions of Confucianism as well as some other features of culture (e.g. literary language and social structure) historically adopted from China naturally influenced the comprehension of IR in Vietnam, like in several other states of SEA.

As noted by D.V. Pivovarov [2009: 13], the Vietnamese understanding of IR is heavily influenced by a patron/client system that has long penetrated societal relationships in the country. This hierarchical outlook can be of use in explaining the internal stability of Vietnam as a state underpinned by continuity, which has a profound impact on the FP course, from a neoclassical realism standpoint.

Vietnamese authors, residing both in the country and abroad, are unsurprisingly most active in rethinking the history and state-of-the-art of local IRT. This is largely due to the command of the Vietnamese language at a native level as well as acquaintance with the local conventions broadly exercised in the academic community, as well as a natural proneness to self-reflection.

The personality of Ho Chi Minh certainly occupies a central place in revisiting how IR was theorised in the country in the 20th century. Nguyen Truong Canh [2020], scrutinising his legacy, points out not only the principles and instruments of Vietnam’s FP (i.e. revolutionary diplomacy, self-reliance, combination of traditional values and socialism to maintain national sovereignty) but also their implications for IR. Dr. Nguyen Van Lan [2021] stresses that the principle of international integration in the process of world revolution as postulated by Ho Chi Minh is not just limited to Vietnam but has a global dimension. As for Ho Chi Minh’s stance in FP, it is described as “firm in objectives, flexible in strategies and tactics”. Still, diplomacy has been labelled by Ho Chi Minh as a means of political struggle [Vu Trong Lam], along with scheming and kinetic engagement. In this way, diplomacy has not exactly been seen as the predominant tool for solving international conflicts at all stages, rather as a way of consolidating military gains.

Ph.D. thesis by Ngo Van Tong [2020] is devoted to the evolution of Vietnam’s perception of the IR in 1986–2016. It is shown that some original terminology has been developed in the Vietnamese IRT since then, namely “object of cooperation” and “object of struggle” [Ibid: 160]. These concepts reflect the balancing approach Vietnamese government has undertaken in the dichotomy of integration vs. maintaining self-sufficiency. Such binary oppositions may well be treated as rooted in the Cold War thinking but simultaneously recalibrated as a way of adapting to the rapidly changing environment at present.

Another paper reports how the IR is taught at various universities of Vietnam, pointing out that in the 21st century special attention is paid to the subregional dimension of Southeast Asian affairs (i.e. ASEAN) [Pham Quang Minh 2008]. The thesis by Pham Van Minh [2008] on the theoretical substantiation of East Asian regionalism represents an instance of a Vietnamese theoretical perspective.

In the late 20th and early 21st century, the global experience of theoretical studies in IR was rendered to and generalised in some publications in the local language. As for the specifically binary approach (e.g. West vs. non-West/Rest/South) displayed in Vietnamese scholarship, one could make a reference to the title offering Marxist-Leninist critique of the Western IRT [Nguyễn Bằng Tường, Vũ Quang Vinh 2001]. Another edition synthesising the investigation of IRT for Vietnamese students and scholars in the form of a dictionary is “Sổ tay Thuật ngữ Quan hệ Quốc tế” [2013] (notable is the reproduction of the terms in English within).

Do Thi Thuy [2022] (one of the most productive Vietnamese commentators on IRT), comes to a conclusion that Vietnamese scholarship is eventually aiming at what is called the Global IR – in line with the rest of countries in SEA. According to the author, it was the “open-door policy” that predetermined the activation of IR studies in the country in 1990s, but both the postcolonial and socialist nature of the state cannot but influence the overall sentiment in IR as a discipline in Vietnam.

Results and discussion

Institutionalisation. First and foremost, it would be necessary to highlight the major universities, research centres and other establishments in Vietnam to discover how the discipline of international studies has been institutionalised in the country with the lapse of time. Based on the inference made by A. Acharya and B. Buzan, it is the institutionalisation of NWIRTs that can challenge the hegemony of their Western counterparts [Acharya, Buzan 2007].

Vietnam’s IR science has been undergoing this process in the recent decades. At present, Vietnam is among top 10 countries in the world by number of think tanks with as many as 180 institutions [McGann 2021]. While this impressive quantitative growth might result in a qualitative leap in the near future, several Vietnamese institutions can be singled out as currently advancing the local investigations into the international affairs.

All in all, the major centres facilitating the exploration of IRT are predictably located in the two metropolitan cities of the country. As such, Vietnam National University situated in Hanoi can serve as an example of such places. The DAV, or Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, is not only a cadre training unit for Vietnam’s MFA, but also a pool for scholars involved in the study of world politics. Employees of its numerous institutes have been publishing their research extensively, including on IRT. Largest schools in Ho Chi Minh City (e.g. Ho Chi Minh International University) have also significantly contributed to the study and development of IRT.

Professional editions also represent an important source channelling the theoretical deliberations. To this end, one can refer to the Political Theory Journal (Lý Luận Chính Trị) issued under the auspices of Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics. DAV, in turn, has been publishing its International Studies Review (Tạp chí Nghiên cứu Quốc tế) since 1993, and some of the papers within contain insights pertaining to the theoretical peculiarities of IR studies. Sporadically, the issues of (inter)national security are also highlighted and theoretically reexamined in the Central Military Committee and Ministry of Defence’s National Defence Journal (Tạp chí Quốc phòng toàn dân).

Theorising FP vs. IRT: key concepts. Even if differentiating between FP theories and IRT (e.g. as presupposed in K. Waltz’ structural realism), one cannot but admit the interconnectedness between those. As such, the concept of “bamboo diplomacy” has been famously used to describe Vietnam’s posture and unwillingness to take sides. This is hardly different from ASEAN’s philosophy in the current geopolitical divide, while the bamboo metaphor has also been utilised to refer to Thailand’s flexibility in positioning itself on the international stage. In Vietnam’s case, to be precise, it can be classified as “clumping bamboo diplomacy” centred around maximising the amount of links with a

view to ensure a more robust stance [Kerr 2016: 366–367]. Most importantly, this term does not only circulate in the expert community but was overtly referred to by the long-standing leader of the CPV Nguyễn Phú Trọng at a diplomatic conference in 2016 [Bui H. Thiêm, Malesky 2023].

One more major notion underpinning Vietnam's course in foreign affairs is that of a “middle power” (cường quốc tầm trung, or trung cường quốc). In sharp contrast to the previous concept, this collocation has hardly ever been explicitly employed by any Vietnamese officials or in the documents. Yet embracing this type of policy thinking *de facto* has assisted Hanoi in formulating its approach to the regional problems (i.e. that of Mekong) [Vu Thi Thu Ngan 2022]. It is rather indicative, though, that Vietnam has originally been denoted as belonging to middle powers in the Western publications [cf. Dobkowska 2015]. Still, local scholars have been resorting to it lately in an increasingly active manner, developing this framework more or less independently. This resulted in a number of publications (mostly by the DAV), including, for instance, the relevance of this concept in the COVID-19 pandemic [Le Dinh Tinh, Vu Thi Thu Ngan 2021]. Notwithstanding the argument as to whether Vietnam is still on the way in its quest to become a middle power (supported i.a. by Le Dinh Tinh representing DAV) or already constitutes one *per se*, the “middle power” concept is one of the most prolific cases of a theoretical elaboration of Vietnam's role in the international arena. Hanoi's adherence to multilateralism as a means of hedging in a more fractured regional environment is another related tendency in this context.

Conceptual formalisation of FP activities is and should be grounded on solid theoretical premises. As such, the famous three “No's” have long been at the heart of Hanoi's security posture: i.e. non-participation in military alliances, ban on allowing other states to create military bases in Vietnam, and renunciation of siding with one partner against a third party. Those are at times augmented by a fourth element: refraining from using force or threatening to do so. This non-alignment is becoming growingly pronounced under the conditions of the visible antagonism and intensifying competition between China and the U.S.

Returning to the theoretical recalibration of the country's positioning on the global scene, it is explicable that “agency” has become the focus of Vietnamese IR studies recently. E.g. Do Thi Thuy [Do T. Thuy 2021] studied this construct in terms of Hanoi's ability to follow an individual trajectory in implementing its FP. The term is employed in addition to the adjective “independent” that has arguably been a primary attribute to describe Vietnam's FP course, equidistant from great powers.

Major schools of thought: a quest for (re)adjustment. This is exactly where the FP theory manifests itself at an intersection with the IRT. Indeed, the concepts of “national independence, unified sovereignty, [and] territorial integrity” [Vu Trong Lam 2021] speak for themselves from the standpoint of their correlation with the major “Western” schools of thought in IRT. These principles Vietnam's FP has been based upon definitely correspond to the nomenclature utilised by the realists in a broad sense. This does not prevent even the Vietnamese military theorists of IR from doubling down on the necessity of international cooperation [Nguyen Chi Vinh 2017], habitually perceived as a trait of (neo)liberalism. Some interest to the latter expressed by the Vietnamese authors can in turn be attributed to its value-based fundament directed at a “positive change” in the international system [Hoàng Khắc Nam 2013]. Social constructivism is present in the gamut of studies undertaken by Vietnamese scholars as well, in particular in its application to Hanoi's convoluted bilateral relationship with China [Nguyen Anh Ngoc 2021].

Considering the overarching character of the Chinese IRT, most frequently cited as a typical representative of “non-Western” thinking, it is logical that Vietnamese authors react to these

deliberations collating their own views against the ideas put forward by theorists in the P.R.C. [Nguyễn Mạnh Hùng 2011]

The teaching of IR in Vietnam has been accountably heavily influenced by Marxism-Leninism. The picture drawn in Ho Chi Minh's works has been repeatedly and scrupulously restored in the publications cited above. On top of that, up till now the corresponding subjects are an inalienable part of the curriculum [Chong, Hamilton-Hart 2008], being mandatory for the students of IR and adjacent fields of social sciences. Nevertheless, in the wake of the “Đổi mới” reforms and decades onwards Vietnamese pundits and teaching staff gradually accepted the patchwork of Western IRT, incorporating those in their works while taking advantage of the local empirics, as demonstrated.

Keeping in mind the prevalent significance of Marxism-Leninism in Vietnamese PoliSci, the ideas of neo- and post-Marxism could fall on fertile ground to produce added value in form of new theories – with a crucial reservation that they should not contradict the Party line. In reality Marxism-Leninism is purportedly resorted to in FP planning and assessing the overall global situation. The hegemony theory due to A. Gramsci has not been left unattended in Vietnam, but it was applied to Vietnam's internal politics and civil society rather than its FP – let alone IR on the whole [Bui H. Thiêm 2013].

The reflectivist frameworks of postcolonialism could potentially be of interest for Vietnamese IR scientists too, mindful of the country's historical experience. Curiously enough, by far this avenue of research has mostly been explored by the Western academia with emphasis on intersectionality [Cf. Pelley 2002]. The tenets of orientalism have also been applied to Vietnam's IR, e.g. to review the bilateral dynamics with China [Nguyễn Tấn Đạt 2022]. E.W. Said's “positional superiority” is conspicuously marked in the absence of the West as the antagonism in the standoff between Hanoi and Beijing reveals the same patterns as in the original bipolar opposites “Europe vs. the East”.

Given women's traditional role in the Vietnamese society as well as the institutionalisation of feminist practice in the country throughout the 20th century [Cao Kim Lan 2019], feminism is already being conceptualised as a legal theory in Vietnamese practice. In a similar manner, presence of some elements of feminism in Vietnamese IR might be probable, although ideological obstacles are not unlikely to hinder this process.

All things considered, the reported trends have expectedly pervaded the Vietnamese science of IR only in the early 21st century (or even as late as several years ago). The enrichment Vietnam's IRT is undergoing at the moment ultimately results in an authentic fusion of “imported” and indigenous approaches.

Conclusion

Vietnamese school of thought can be regarded as an emerging representative of the Asian IR scholarship with its distinct original features. The national specialists contributed to the IR as a discipline by supplementing the robustness of the existing theories through applying them to factual knowledge on a country and (sub)regional levels.

In modern times Vietnam's FP and IRT combine adopting Western approaches with developing indigenous ones while retaining allegiance to the principles of Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh thought. Such an evolutionary stage can be provisionally denominated as a transition phase, while it seems reasonable that the concepts absorbed from the Western theories are being accommodated with the ideas from Ho Chi Minh's thoughts oftentimes perceived as axioms. This crosspollination between the universally endorsed and locally developed concepts lies at the cornerstone of the IRT in Vietnam. Be that as it may, the evidence of an existing full-scale, autonomous NWIRT in Vietnam seems to be

quite slim. The science of IR is comparatively young in the country, even though this does not preclude the epistemic community in the area from fulfilling its obvious but as yet partly discovered potential.

The aphoristic thinking is reflected in the language used to speak about IR in Vietnam. Lively metaphors and spot-on comparisons, especially in a military context [Cf. Đào Hồng Nhung 2022], form an inextricable part of the Vietnamese IR discourse, exemplifying the subtleties of an Asian worldview.

The development of Vietnam's economy from within in its post-pandemic recovery becomes a vital source of the country's FP. While it is tangible that the rationale behind Vietnam's diplomacy is chiefly formed by pragmatic considerations, fundamental science is not neglected in the respective institutions either, even though it is clearly not the centre of attention for Vietnamese scholars, whose research is motivated by the ideological guidelines in no small measure.

Without a doubt, this article is merely an attempt to scratch the surface of the designated problem. Further research could be directed at tracking different – if not competing – schools of thought in Vietnamese science of IR, as well as conducting in-depth content and discourse analyses of the relevant publications in Vietnamese. By this reasoning, predicting the prospects of Vietnamese IRT and their future development – daunting as it may seem – is also not impossible.

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