

Where Has Tough Vietnam Gone?

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In early May, I led a delegation of the Japan Institute for National Fundamentals to visit the Vietnamese capital of Hanoi. We exchanged views with people from such Vietnamese think tanks as the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam and the Institute for Chinese Studies at the Vietnam Academy of Social Science, focusing on China issues, particularly how Vietnam could address territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

My view of Vietnam has turned around through a series of discussions in Hanoi. I had perceived that Vietnam was characterized by its strong spirit of independence, winning independence through a war with France, leading the United States to withdraw from Vietnam and expelling China's invasion in 1979. I now recognize that I may have to revise my perception.

Fears about China

This recognition has emerged from a short-term observation of the country and I may have to consider how frankly the Vietnamese side spoke in our discussions. But I suspect that Vietnam now advocates giving priority to peace and is implementing the so-called omnidirectional foreign policy. I felt the suspicion through talks with not only the Vietnamese think tanks but also Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister Ho Xuan Son, who is best versed in Chinese affairs within the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry. The suspicion overlaps an allegation that Vietnam is unusually afraid of China.

The territorial disputes in the South China Sea may be a grave problem linked to the fate of Vietnam. It may be impossible for Vietnam alone to address the disputes. Vietnam should build cooperation with the Philippines and other members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and even the United States, with which it shares threats from China. Indispensable preconditions for the cooperation are Vietnam's accurate recognition of Chinese threats and its strong determination to resort to use of force to defend its independence.

However, a Vietnamese participant in our discussions made the following astonishing remark:

“We understand that we should not view ourselves (Vietnam) as weak. But we have no choice but to view us so. Vietnam’s size and economy are far smaller than China’s. If we were to counter threats alone, we could plunge into an arms race.

Fear of Finlandization

China has continued its military expansion over a quarter century, brushing off Vietnam's intentions. In fact, Vietnam's economy is about one-50th of China's and its military spending is about one-33rd of China's. There are huge gaps between Vietnam and China. If Vietnam views itself as weak because of such power gaps, it may mean Vietnam's Finlandization where Finland and some other countries succumbed to the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

As expected, China has reportedly pressed Vietnam to refrain from participating in the Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade talks, interpreting Vietnam's TPP initiative participation as indicating its pro-U.S. approach. Under the pressure from both China and the United States, Vietnam explains: "Our cooperation with some third countries may not help enhance our bargaining power against China. We will seek to secure peace through cooperation with every country."

This kind of omnidirectional foreign policy will never bring about peace or security. In the real international society, a power threat can easily blow off peace based only on rhetoric or philosophy. What has happened to Vietnam that had pursued a pragmatic foreign policy while being sandwiched between superpowers? My question remains unanswered. (In Hanoi)

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