



Vietnam's UN Security Council Membership: A Rosy Road? By Ta Minh Tuan

The United Nations General Assembly cast a near unanimous vote (183 out of 190) in favor of Vietnam becoming a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council on Oct. 16, 2007. This is the first time Vietnam takes this position since it joined the UN in 1977. Long before the official announcement was made at the UN, the atmosphere had been heated in Vietnam by frequent media coverage of the event. One can feel rising enthusiasm in Hanoi about Vietnam's new diplomatic success.

Vietnam had expressed its desire to bid for a UN Security Council non-permanent membership for years. Since the foreign policy of *doi moi* was adopted in 1986, cultivating friends and expanding Vietnam's international role and presence have always occupied a top priority. Successful economic reform has earned Vietnam a certain respect in the world, and thus heightened Vietnam's overall standing. Vietnam is now a member of various groupings such as ASEAN, APEC, and the WTO.

However, the aspiration to make Vietnam more visible and known to the international community seemed incomplete if Vietnam did not play a major role at the most important multilateral organization, namely the UN. Taking a seat on the Security Council serves this purpose; this is clearly the highest recognition of victory for Vietnam's multilateral diplomacy. But what does the membership in the UNSC mean to Vietnam? Is it all about political benefit? What else does Vietnam need to prepare itself to assume this seat?

The political benefits are manifold. Besides Vietnam's efforts to proactively participate in world affairs and to be a responsible partner being acknowledged, its position could be enhanced and valued accordingly. Vietnam will have great opportunities to get involved in solving issues of global magnitude and to interact regularly with big powers. Vietnam is expected to represent ASEAN's view and that of other small countries, particularly when it comes to issues of common concern such as environmental protection, hunger eradication, and poverty alleviation. Vietnam will learn how to work in a decision-making organ of the highest level. More significantly, Vietnam will exercise its real power by its vote at the Council. To some countries, this may be symbolic, but it does count in the case of Vietnam. It remains to be seen whether Vietnam can make the most out of its membership, but at this moment the road ahead looks bumpy as Vietnam will face a number of challenges.

First, Vietnam does not have much experience working in international organizations. The number of Vietnamese serving in the UN system are few. It is not clear how Vietnam will staff its Permanent Mission in New York with enough

qualified personnel. Frequent backdoor consultation and lobbying are a daily practice at the UNSC. Nevertheless, Vietnamese diplomats are not entirely accustomed to this practice in such an environment. It is hard for Vietnam to handle complex multilateral diplomatic maneuvering. Although Vietnam has sent some officials abroad, particularly to its mission at the UN, to get first hand knowledge and training, it appears to lack well-trained officials for such a big job.

Second, as a member of the UNSC, Vietnam should make more contributions to UN activities. Here emerges the question of Vietnam's capacity and resources. For example, can Vietnam dispatch its troops for UN peacekeeping missions when called? Can Vietnam somehow share more of the UN financial burden? Despite its rapid economic development, Vietnam remains a poor country with the GDP per capita in absolute term at about \$720 in 2006. This will put some constraints on Vietnam's intention to expand its role at the UN.

Third, Vietnam will have to vote at the Council to exercise its rights and obligations. How does it vote? Vietnam needs clear policies on the wide variety of international issues the Council is about to address, such as Iran's uranium enrichment program, Myanmar's human rights and democracy, Darfur's genocide, Kosovo's status, North Korea's nuclear program, and the future of Iraq. It appears Vietnam has not made its stand clear on these issues. In fact, they all are thorny for Vietnam.

For instance, can Vietnam vote in favour of tighter sanction against Iran or endorse some form of attack on Iran's nuclear facilities? One should remember that Iran has insisted on its right to peaceful nuclear development. Vietnam will build its own nuclear power plant in 10 years' time. It also is considering an ambitious program for civil nuclear development and application. Or, how can Vietnam vote on Kosovo, an issue of no direct concern to Vietnam at all? Again, one should keep in mind that Vietnam has its own problem with ethnic minorities in the central highlands. In other organizations and fora, Vietnam can choose to keep silent as it wishes, but it cannot do that at the UNSC.

Fourth, Vietnam's vote will be put under close scrutiny by big powers, primarily China and the U.S. They will judge Vietnam based on how it casts its vote. This could be problematic for Vietnam as its vote will certainly have varying impacts on its already sensitive and complex relations with both China and the U.S. The governments of these two countries will hold Vietnam accountable for its position on the aforementioned issues, which are very controversial. If Vietnam does not handle them well, it will get caught in the middle of a fight between the big powers.

These challenges are not, however, insurmountable. First, Vietnam must perceive its new role in an impartial way. The UNSC is a real battle ground and serving on it is not an easy task. There is no room for mistakes and Vietnam should pay due attention to its performance. Vietnam should invest sufficient resources in its UN Permanent Mission, both materially and with qualified personnel. The best and brightest officials should be sent to New York. To prepare them for their posting, more intensive training courses should be held in cooperation with countries that possess valuable experiences in the workings of the UNSC. This will be one of the decisive factors helping Vietnam succeed.

Second, Vietnam's policymakers should reach interagency consensus on the international issues high on the UN agenda in order to make it easier for Vietnam to cast its vote in its best own interest. This is crucial given the fact that such consensus is not always easy to achieve among top leaders, especially if the issues are sensitive and have possible implications for Vietnam's domestic affairs and relationships with major powers. Serious debate and discussion on how and under what conditions Vietnam votes on specific issues should be done sooner rather than later. To some extent, this will help Vietnam manage its ties with China and the U.S.

Third, Vietnam's Permanent Mission in New York should have fast-track access to the highest authority to get directions and decisions for voting. To this end, a task force from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Public Security, among others, should be formed and chaired by one of the Politburo members to coordinate inter-agency efforts and activities.

Last but not least, during its term, Vietnam should avoid abstention as much as possible if it wants to play an active and responsible role at the Council.

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