

---

*Karol Kościelniak*<sup>1</sup>

## SOME COMMENTS ON VIETNAM'S SECURITY IN THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY

**Keywords:** Vietnam, international security, 21<sup>st</sup> century, South China Sea

**ABSTRACT:** The main objective set by many countries is ensuring security. The means to accomplish this goal are the armed forces, obliged to guarantee safe functioning of the state and its citizens. There are states, for which maintaining a powerful, modern army has enormous significance for their superpower status, for their preparedness to a potential conflict or as a deterrent for the neighbouring states. Therefore, in the following text I will deal with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, because of its history, and especially due to the region where it is situated – one of the hottest places on Earth, full of misunderstandings, disputes and conflicts causing that the states situated there, including Vietnam, are modernising their armies.

The main objective set by many countries is ensuring security. The means to accomplish this goal are the armed forces, obliged to guarantee safe functioning of the state and its citizens. There are states, for which maintaining a powerful, modern army has enormous significance for their superpower status, for their preparedness to a potential conflict or as a deterrent for the neighbouring states.

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, just like other countries, functions in determined conditions which influence a way of determining and understanding the security and shaping the security policy. There prevails a division to problems of internal and external nature. While talking about

---

<sup>1</sup> Karol Kościelniak, Institute of History, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8240-5858>; [kkos@amu.edu.pl](mailto:kkos@amu.edu.pl).

and indicating global problems which in consequence can influence the internal security of a country, challenges and threats that countries face need to be noticed. These are ecological, demographic, political, economic and social threats. Looking at factors determining the internal security of a country, special attention needs to be paid to a condition of relations with surroundings, system stability, a level of social peace, a level of public safety and a level of public order (Kościelniak, 2013, p. 102).

If it goes about the security of a country, it can be said that it is an ability of a country to protect its internal values from internal and external threats. These include: survival (of a country, nation, saving biological existence), territorial integrity, political independence, quality of life (Fehler, Dziubek, 2010, p. 14). Security analyzed with a use of subjective criteria has also an individual dimension. Security of an individual means a freedom from threats against values significant for everyone such as life, health, freedom, inviolability of a person and possessions, freedom of beliefs and professing opinions, right to work. It can be said that security of individuals creates security of a country, security of a country builds international security (Fehler, Dziubek, 2010, p. 14). This is why internal security of a country is a state consisting in a system order, a state of relations and processes in a country which guarantee effective and harmonious realization of a country's and its citizens' interests, creates at the same time a potential of abilities to a quick diagnosis and reaction in case of appearing threats against those interests. Among the most important categories creating the basis of efficient actions for guaranteeing a proper level of a country's internal security, there is guaranteeing the system security, social peace, personal security, public security and public order. Realization of these assumptions would not be possible if the external security was not guaranteed. So the essence of security of a country is international security that is external factors and internal security that is internal factors which cause that the society develops in stable conditions guaranteed by a country and its internal and external policy (Kościelniak, 2013, p. 102–103).

In 1986 in Vietnam, there were introduced reforms *doi moi* that means “renewal”, which changed the country transforming it from the inside as well as changing its international position. From today's perspective, we know that this new policy of opening on the international arena had a key

role in a development of Vietnam at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century (Kościelniak, 2014, p. 247; Kościelniak, 2013, p. 102–124).

When a communist block fell apart and the USSR finally collapsed, Vietnam was in a kind of a “political void” and its closest friends have suddenly disappeared. The country was in face of a complete international isolation which influenced getting of the social-economic crisis even more severe. Vietnam had to choose: speeding up reforms or a perspective of a fall of the political-economic system (Ta Minh Tuan, 2002, p. 53–54). It chose reforms.

A success of *doi moi* to a considerable extent depended on improvement of Vietnam's international position, the country had to open toward the external world and diversify its relations with other countries. Leaders of Vietnam declared then that their country wants friendly relations and cooperation with all nations in the world regardless of their political and economic system (Ta Minh Tuan, 2002, p. 54). In reality, it meant the normalization of relations with China and ASEAN countries, improvement of relations with Western powers and including Vietnam in regional and global economic structures (Kościelniak, 2014, p. 249). However, it needs to be emphasized that the Vietnamese foreign policy is defined by relations with China and they determine actions of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The issue of relations with China seems to be the most important one for Vietnam. At the same time, undoubtedly they are the hardest ones out of its bilateral relations which results from its geopolitical situation which is very complicated because of a historical experience. Vietnam cannot allow itself to ignore China and not to develop a cooperation with the country, however, at the same time, historical grudges and a specific mental attitude which is a mix of fear and suspicions does not disappear easily. However, currently in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it seems that for both sides, a national interest which means a trade exchange and an economic cooperation is the most important (Kościelniak, 2014, p. 251).

Recent years show that Vietnam starts to strengthen its military power or it can be rather said that it modernizes or completes the previous one willing to remain an important player in the region especially on the South China Sea. Tightening technical and military cooperation with Russia

which was and still is the main deliverer of the gun to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, is to serve that goal. Entering the new age, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam put emphasis on increasing its participation of the South China Sea increasing at the same time its external safety. During the 9<sup>th</sup> Congress of Communist Party of Vietnam in 2011, a strategy of development of the Navy was started, with a focus on protection of territorial waters and sea resources of Vietnam. To achieve it, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam modernizes its Navy and Air Forces and also equips its army with systems of warning and recognition (Kościelniak, 2015, p. 149–150). It is a confirmation of the strategy published in “The White Paper on Vietnam National Defense 2009” where it was emphasized that Vietnam wants to build a modernized, equipped with technologically advanced weapons army, with modernization of the Navy and Air Forces as a priority (*Vietnam National Defence*, p. 159). To achieve those goals Vietnam asked the Russians for help with who it started to sign contracts for delivery of weapons.

Asian states invest huge amounts of money into the modernisation of their armies. An American advisory company AMI International has estimated that in the next 20 years, the states in East Asia will invest ca. \$200 billion only into their naval fleets, with possibly as many as 1048 large and small warships coming into play. These armaments are fuelled by the territorial disputes and by Chinese armaments (Kościelniak, 2016, p. 117).

It can be definitely stated that considering the military and political potential, the dominant side is the People’s Republic of China, possessing an overwhelming military potential. This compels the remaining states to enhance the combat potential of their armed forces and to strengthen the military cooperation. All the states of the region are enhancing especially their marine military forces (See: Stach, 2015, p. 85–119). They buy new marine vessels or modernize the old ones. Most of these states are trying to introduce their own constructions into service. Apart from the navy, strong emphasis is placed on the air force which is also strengthened by the acquisition of the new aircraft (Kościelniak, 2016, p. 117).

Chinese ambitions triggered a regional arms race. Neighbors competing with China are well aware that they will not be able to defeat the powerful opponent alone. Therefore, recent years have brought the tightening of the cooperation between particular states. One of China's most relentless neighbours is Vietnam. There is nothing new, as Vietnam is China's traditional rival in the South China Sea. The Vietnamese military knows that it would not be able to defend its interests on its own. However, it is not left alone in their proceedings, as it receives huge support from Russia (See: Pietrasik, 2015, pp. 9–30). India also grants considerable aid by training Vietnamese soldiers and financing the modernization of Vietnamese army. Vietnam realizes that any kind of offensive action against China would be a suicide, therefore the state concentrates on building the deterring potential (Kościelniak, 2016, p. 118).

For the past several decades, the South China Sea area has been the arena of competition between the countries of Southeast Asia that set up claims to maritime areas and the islands as well as to what can be found under the seabed, namely oil and gas. Apart from the resources found in the sea and under the seabed, this body of water is an important shipping route, which makes it a strategically significant area for each of the countries in the region, and also some others. The region is presently the fastest-developing region of the world as far as economy is concerned. Despite considerable political, social, economic and cultural diversity, the processes taking place there occur dynamically and are multidimensional, but also pose certain threats, e.g. to economic security of the whole region (Skulska, Skulski (ed.), 2010. p. 322). The South China Sea itself is the key point of the global competition between world superpowers and Asian states. The whole world is involved in business there. Vital interests of a number of states intersect in this relatively small body of water (Kościelniak, 2016, p. 114). Global processes may produce multifaceted results in particular regions.

Avoiding larger conflict on the South China Sea thus far was the resultant of many factors, out of which the most significant one seems to be the Chinese attitude consisting in balancing the issues in the

sphere of security. A larger military conflict might erase all the efforts to create a stable and peaceful neighborhood that have been made so far, and thus impair the Chinese endeavor to fulfil the national dream of “power and prosperity” (Bojko, Piwnicki, 2010, pp. 131–132). There are also concerns that the dispute will become international, which is what we are presently observing. We ought to be aware that all the states wish to ensure security to their maritime interests, and especially to the maritime routes, therefore, we can expect progressing arms race in the region of the South China Sea. However, the risk of a full-scale conflict does not seem very probable (Stach, 2012, p. 371). Increasingly tight economic ties are a warrant of peace, making war too hazardous and quite unprofitable. It is worth noticing that conflicts, like the extension of the naval forces are also a tool of internal politics. They allow to unite the society and build the feeling of national pride (Ho Thanh, Behrendt, 2014, p. 47).

Solving disputes over the islands in the South China Sea, employing both the peaceful the military means is quite unlikely. The agreement of the parties would mean a waiver of claims of one of the states and an image failure. And despite the relations between the states happen to be strained, armed confrontation is also improbable. For China, the conflict might be synonymous with deteriorating their position on the international arena, which would mean inhibiting the economic growth. The remaining states also would not benefit from the conflict, because China, as the stronger party would probably defeat them. Even if the remaining states were successful after creating a coalition against China, their economies might be negatively affected. It is worth remembering that despite political conflicts, Asian states dynamically develop multilateral economic relations. China is the largest trading partner for the states belonging to ASEAN, and the latter, after the USA and the EU, is in turn China’s largest trading partner. Undoubtedly, the South China Sea is the key to the region, not only on account of the maritime routes located there. What is equally or even more important, is that the state which will manage to gain supremacy over this sea, will control all the region. Thus, the want for domination is the main reason (Kościelniak, 2016, p. 124).

Vietnam remains in geographic, civilizational and ideological proximity networks with China. System convergences between Vietnam and

China are very large, which also affects mutual relations. In addition, China remains the main economic partner of Vietnam, an investor and supplier of financial aid (Pietrasiak, 2017, p. 167). Actions taken by Vietnam in recent years shape the image of this country as a country fighting for its interests. A country that skillfully and persistently seeks support for them in the region as well as on the wider international forum (Pietrasiak, 2017, p. 169). Vietnam, on the one hand, is trying to conduct intensive dialogue and involve comprehensive cooperation of the Chinese partner, on the other hand, actively seeking all strong partners with whom cooperation can at least partially reduce the importance of relations and pressure from China (Szumski, 2017, p. 147).

Vietnam is not in danger of an open military conflict with China. It does not have to feel threatened in this respect. However, wanting to be reckoned with and being an important player in the region, it needs to modernize its armed forces. This is particularly evident in the arming of the Navy and the Air Force of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, which are supposed to guarantee Vietnam's national security in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Bojko, J., Piwnicki, G. (2010). Mocarstwowa polityka Chin na morzach Azji Południowo-Wschodniej. In: J. Marszałek-Kawa (ed.), *Chiny supermocarstwem XXI wieku? Rozważania na temat polityki i gospodarki Państwa Środka* (pp. 107–137). Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek.
- Fehler, W., Dziubek, I. T. (2010). *Bezpieczeństwo wewnętrzne państwa*. Warsaw: Ministerstwo Rozwoju Regionalnego.
- Ho Thanh, Ł., Behrendt, P. (2014). Zbrojenia morskie a mocarstwowość państw Azji i Pacyfiku. In: J. Marszałek-Kawa (ed.), *Azjatyckie strategie bezpieczeństwa w progu XXI wieku* (pp. 247–259). Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek.
- Kościelna, K. (2014). Czy Wietnam może się czuć zagrożony w XXI wieku? Próba odpowiedzi. In: J. Marszałek-Kawa (ed.), *Azjatyckie strategie bezpieczeństwa w progu XXI wieku* (pp. pp. 247–259). Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek.
- Kościelniak, K. (2013). Wpływ „doi moi” na bezpieczeństwo wewnętrzne Wietnamu w XXI wieku. In: J. Marszałek-Kawa (ed.), *Azjatyckie strategie bezpieczeństwa* (pp. 102–124). Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek.

- Kościelniak, K. (2015). Modernizacja sił zbrojnych Socjalistycznej Republiki Wietnamu w XXI wieku. In: J. Marszałek-Kawa (ed.), *Bezpieczeństwo współczesnej Azji* (pp. 148–165). Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek.
- Kościelniak, K. (2016). Międzynarodowe implikacje sporu na Morzu Południowochińskim. In: J. Marszałek-Kawa (ed.), *Polityka bezpieczeństwa w regionie Azji i Pacyfiku* (pp. 112–127). Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek.
- Pietrasiak, M. (2017). Wietnam – ewolucja sytuacji regionalnej i stosunki z mocarstwami. W cieniu sporu na Morzu Południowochińskim. *Azja-Pacyfik*, 20, pp. 162–175.
- Pietrasik, M. (2015). Rosyjsko-wietnamskie partnerstwo strategiczne – nowy etap rewolucji dwustronnych. In: J. Marszałek-Kawa, E. Kaja (eds.), *Między dialogiem a konfliktem. Współczesne stosunki międzynarodowe na kontynencie azjatyckim* (pp. 9–30). Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek.
- Skulska, B., Skulski, P. (ed.) (2010). *Bezpieczeństwo międzynarodowe w regionie Azji i Pacyfiku. Wybrane zagadnienia*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego we Wrocławiu.
- Stach, Ł. (2012). Rozwój zbrojeń morskich na Dalekim Wschodzie na początku XXI stulecia. Implikacje dla sytuacji militarnej i politycznej regionu. In: J. Marszałek-Kawa, R. Gawłowski (eds.), *Ewolucja azjatyckiej polityki bezpieczeństwa* (pp. 335–371). Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek.
- Stach, Ł. (2015). Małe, ale czy niegroźne? Floty wojenne mniejszych krajów Azji Południowo-Wschodniej. In: J. Marszałek-Kawa (ed.), *Bezpieczeństwo współczesnej Azji* (pp. 85–119). Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek.
- Szumski, K. (2017). Azja Południowo-Wschodnia w polityce USA: nowe rozdanie. *Azja-Pacyfik*, 20, pp. 133–161.
- Ta Minh Tuan (2012). Polityka zagraniczna Wietnamu w okresie „odnowy” (doi moi): źródła i ewolucja. *Azja-Pacyfik*, 5, pp. 51–62.
- Vietnam National Defence, Hanoi 12–2009.*