

HO CHI MINH'S THOUGHT ON INDEPENDENCE AND AUTONOMY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF VIETNAM AT THE 14TH NATIONAL CONGRESS

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Abstract

In the context of profound changes in the international environment, strategic competition among major powers, growing interdependence, and increasing uncertainty, the question of how states maintain autonomy while remaining deeply engaged with the international system has become increasingly significant. For Vietnam, independence and autonomy constitute a consistent principle rooted in Ho Chi Minh's thought and continuously developed in the foreign policy of the Communist Party of Vietnam. This article examines the relationship between Ho Chi Minh's thought on independence and autonomy and the development of strategic autonomy in the Party's foreign policy at the 14th National Congress. Using textual analysis, historical analysis, and a systematic approach, the article examines *Ho Chi Minh's Complete Works* and the official documents of the Communist Party of Vietnam, particularly the documents of the 14th National Congress. The analysis argues that strategic autonomy at the 14th National Congress does not replace the principle of independence and autonomy but represents its development and practical realization under new international conditions. This development is reflected in the closer integration of independence and autonomy with self-reliance and self-strengthening, multilateralization and diversification of external relations, international integration, and the enhancement of national capabilities. Strategic autonomy, therefore, should not be understood as withdrawal from international

interdependence, but as the capacity to manage dependencies, preserve policy choices, mobilize external resources, and act proactively in pursuit of national interests.

Keywords

Ho Chi Minh's thought; independence; autonomy; strategic autonomy; Vietnamese foreign policy

1. Introduction

In recent years, the international environment has undergone profound, rapid, and increasingly unpredictable changes. Strategic competition among major powers, the emergence of a multipolar and multicentric international order, adjustments in global supply chains, and intensifying competition in science, technology, and strategic resources have significantly altered the conditions under which states operate. Against this backdrop, the meaning and requirements of independence and autonomy have also evolved. Independence and autonomy are no longer understood solely in terms of the right to self-determination and the ability to resist external coercion; they are increasingly associated with a state's capacity to preserve policy choices, strengthen resilience, and proactively adapt to changes in the international environment.

For Vietnam, independence and autonomy constitute a consistent principle in Ho Chi Minh's thought and in the revolutionary line of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh viewed independence as inseparable from the right of the nation to determine its own destiny and from its capacity to decide for itself matters concerning the country's future. At the same time, he attached particular importance to self-reliance, self-strengthening, and the development of national capabilities, while never equating autonomy with isolation. In Ho Chi Minh's thought, safeguarding independence and autonomy was consistently associated with expanding international relations, securing the support of progressive forces, combining national strength with the strength of the times, and employing diplomacy flexibly to safeguard national interests.

Throughout the reform process, these principles have continued to be inherited and developed by the Communist Party of Vietnam in its foreign policy. The 14th National Congress took place in a context in which the requirements of maintaining a peaceful environment, mobilizing external resources, and enhancing the country's international standing have become increasingly intertwined with the need to strengthen national autonomy. The Resolution of the 14th National Congress sets forth the goal of "strategic autonomy, self-strengthening, and self-confidence", while reaffirming the consistent foreign policy of independence, autonomy, self-strengthening, peace, friendship, cooperation, and development; promoting the multilateralization and diversification of external relations; and pursuing deep, comprehensive, and effective international integration (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026). The Political Report submitted to the Congress likewise situates foreign policy within the requirement of developing external relations commensurate with the country's stature and position, while ensuring and safeguarding the highest level of national interests (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026).

This context raises a theoretical and practical question that requires further clarification: How is the relationship between Ho Chi Minh's thought on independence and autonomy and the development of strategic autonomy in the foreign policy of the Communist Party of Vietnam at the 14th National Congress manifested? This question requires a careful analytical approach. The contemporary concept of "strategic autonomy" should not be conflated with a concept directly employed by Ho Chi Minh; at the same time, it should not be treated as an entirely separate line of thought detached from the foundations of independence and autonomy established in Ho Chi Minh's thought. In this study, strategic autonomy is approached as a way of developing and realizing the requirements of independence and autonomy under new international conditions, in which the capacity for self-determination is linked to national capabilities, the ability to preserve strategic policy choices, and the capacity to manage external relations proactively.

Studies of Ho Chi Minh's thought have addressed relatively comprehensively such issues as national independence, self-reliance, self-strengthening, the combination of national strength with the strength of the times, and Ho Chi Minh's thought on foreign relations. Meanwhile, studies of Vietnam's foreign policy have focused extensively on the reform process, international integration, the multilateralization and diversification of external relations, and the enhancement of the country's international position. Nevertheless, the trajectory from independence and autonomy in Ho Chi Minh's thought to strategic autonomy in the Party's contemporary foreign policy thinking warrants further clarification, particularly as the 14th National Congress places strategic autonomy within the broader framework of national development while continuing to affirm a foreign policy based on independence, autonomy, self-strengthening, multilateralization, and diversification.

Against this background, the article examines the fundamental elements of Ho Chi Minh's thought on independence and autonomy that provide an intellectual foundation for Vietnam's foreign policy thinking, and then analyzes their continuity and development in the foreign policy of the Communist Party of Vietnam at the 14th National Congress. The study employs textual analysis, historical analysis, and a systematic approach, drawing primarily on *Ho Chi Minh's Complete Works* and the official documents of the Communist Party of Vietnam, particularly the documents of the 14th National Congress. The article argues that strategic autonomy at the 14th National Congress does not replace the principle of independence and autonomy; rather, it represents a development in the way that principle is realized within an international environment characterized by increasingly intense strategic competition and interdependence.

2. From Independence and Autonomy in Ho Chi Minh's Thought to Strategic Autonomy

2.1. Independence and Autonomy as the Nation's Right to Self-Determination

In Ho Chi Minh's thought, national independence first and foremost means a nation's right to determine its own destiny. Independence entails not merely the termination of political domination but also the right to decide for oneself matters concerning the nation and the country. Ho Chi Minh stated: "Independence means that we ourselves manage all our affairs, without outside interference" (Minh, 2011d, p. 162). This conception establishes the core meaning of independence in terms of self-determination: an independent state must possess the capacity to determine its own development path, policy choices, and responses to national affairs without external imposition.

Ho Chi Minh also recognized that independence in name is not synonymous with substantive independence. He emphasized the need for conditions capable of safeguarding national autonomy, including political, economic, defense, and diplomatic capabilities. In a 1946 statement, he pointed out that without "its own army, its own diplomacy, its own economy," independence would remain incomplete in substantive terms (Minh, 2011d, p. 602). Thus, in Ho Chi Minh's thought, independence does not stop at a legal status; it must be underpinned by the state's actual capabilities. This has important methodological implications for understanding autonomy in international relations: the right to self-determination can be sustained only when a state possesses sufficient capabilities to protect and implement its choices.

2.2. Self-Reliance and Self-Strengthening without Isolation

In Ho Chi Minh's thought, autonomy is closely associated with self-reliance and self-strengthening. Throughout his leadership of the Vietnamese revolution, he repeatedly emphasized relying on one's own strength, most notably in the principle of "using our own strength to liberate ourselves" (Minh, 2011b, p. 596). He also affirmed that "a nation that does not rely on itself and merely waits for assistance from another nation is not worthy of independence" (Minh, 2011a, p. 445). Self-reliance and self-strengthening, therefore, constitute conditions for a nation to genuinely determine its own destiny, while also

providing the basis for proactively selecting and making use of external assistance.

At the same time, Ho Chi Minh did not place self-reliance and self-strengthening in opposition to international cooperation. On the contrary, he advocated expanding relations with other countries, taking advantage of favorable international conditions, and combining national strength with the strength of the times. In external relations, he advanced the principle of “being friends with all democratic countries and not antagonizing anyone” (Minh, 2011d, p. 256). This reflects a consistent feature of Ho Chi Minh’s thought: autonomy does not mean closing the door to the outside world; independence does not mean isolation. Autonomy creates the capacity to participate proactively in international relations, while cooperation and the mobilization of external resources must be pursued on the basis of safeguarding the nation’s right to self-determination and national interests.

Ho Chi Minh also expressed the relationship between national capabilities and external relations in the concise observation: “National strength is the gong, while diplomacy is its sound. The larger the gong, the louder the sound” (Minh, 2011c, p. 147). Diplomacy, therefore, cannot be separated from the foundation of national capabilities. At the same time, diplomacy can help create a peaceful environment, secure international support, and expand the conditions necessary for strengthening national capabilities. The relationship between internal and external resources in Ho Chi Minh’s thought is thus not one of exclusion but of mutual reinforcement, in which internal strength provides the foundation while external resources are proactively mobilized to serve national development and defense.

2.3. From the Foundations of Independence and Autonomy to the Concept of Strategic Autonomy

In contemporary international relations scholarship, “strategic autonomy” has no single definition that enjoys universal acceptance. Different approaches tend to emphasize the capacity to make independent decisions,

preserve policy space, manage relationships of dependence, and enhance a state's capacity to act under constraints imposed by the international system (Chapman, 2026; Vu et al., 2024). A common feature of these approaches is that strategic autonomy is not understood as complete independence from the outside world, but rather as the capacity to pursue interests and make policy choices proactively under conditions of interdependence.

Against this background, this article conceptualizes strategic autonomy as a state's capacity to maintain its right to self-determination, safeguard its core interests, and preserve the policy space necessary to make and implement choices in a complex and interdependent international environment. This conceptualization makes it possible to connect strategic autonomy with the core elements of Ho Chi Minh's thought on independence and autonomy while avoiding the conflation of concepts developed in different historical contexts. Strategic autonomy does not mean self-sufficiency, nor does it entail minimizing all forms of external dependence; rather, the central issue is to strengthen national capabilities so that the state does not lose its capacity to choose when external dependencies change or become sources of strategic pressure.

In this sense, strategic autonomy is not a concept retrospectively attributed to Ho Chi Minh, but rather a contemporary analytical framework for identifying the development of the thinking on independence and autonomy under new conditions. The principles of self-determination, self-reliance, self-strengthening, the development of national capabilities, proactive expansion of international relations, and the combination of national strength with the strength of the times in Ho Chi Minh's thought provide an important intellectual foundation. Strategic autonomy, in turn, reflects the need to develop the means through which these principles can be realized in an international environment characterized by increasingly intense competition, interdependence, and overlapping interests. From this foundation, the foreign policy of the Communist Party of Vietnam at the 14th National Congress can be examined not merely in terms of its continuity with the principle of independence and autonomy, but

also in terms of developing national capacity for autonomy in order to expand Vietnam's strategic space for choice and action.

3. The Development of Strategic Autonomy in The Foreign Policy of The Communist Party of Vietnam at The 14th National Congress

3.1. From Safeguarding Independence and Autonomy to Enhancing Strategic Autonomy

Building on Ho Chi Minh's thought on independence and autonomy, the foreign policy of the Communist Party of Vietnam throughout the reform period has gradually evolved toward linking the nation's right to self-determination with the actual capabilities required to exercise that right. If independence and autonomy constitute the guiding principle, self-reliance and self-strengthening provide the basis for developing national capabilities, while proactive international integration serves as a means of expanding the country's development opportunities and mobilizing external resources. Under increasingly complex international conditions, these elements have been incorporated into a higher-level requirement: enhancing the country's capacity for strategic autonomy.

The 14th National Congress places "strategic autonomy, self-strengthening, and self-confidence" among the goals of national development, while identifying the promotion of external relations and international integration as a key and regular task. The Resolution of the Congress emphasizes steadfast adherence to the goals of national independence and socialism, together with the pursuit of strategic autonomy, proactive international integration, and the promotion of the will for autonomy, self-reliance, and self-strengthening. Strategic autonomy is thus situated within the broader process of national development rather than treated as a separate orientation of foreign policy (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026a, pp. 21, 118; Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026b., p. 318).

In the field of foreign policy, this development is first reflected in the continued affirmation of a foreign policy based on independence, autonomy,

self-strengthening, peace, friendship, cooperation, and development, as well as the commitment to ensure and safeguard the highest level of national interests on the basis of international law and the Charter of the United Nations. Importantly, independence and autonomy are not positioned in opposition to international integration; rather, they are pursued through the process of integration itself. Proactive international integration therefore does not mean accepting all forms of external constraint. It requires the state to possess sufficient capabilities to determine the degree, modalities, and areas of engagement that best serve its national interests.

From this perspective, the strategic autonomy thinking articulated at the 14th National Congress represents a qualitative development in the way autonomy is conceptualized. Autonomy is no longer framed solely in relation to the risk of losing independence or becoming politically dependent; it is increasingly associated with the state's resilience, capacity to make choices, and capacity to act within an interdependent international system. This is consistent with contemporary approaches that understand strategic autonomy not as an absolute condition, but as a state's capacity to preserve policy choices and act in response to external pressures, uncertainties, and dependencies (Vu et al., 2024).

The shift from “safeguarding” to “enhancing capabilities” is also reflected in the Congress's understanding of the requirements for external relations. The Congress not only emphasizes safeguarding national interests but also calls for developing external relations commensurate with the country's historical and cultural stature and international position; improving the effectiveness of international integration; strengthening Vietnam's role in multilateral mechanisms; and proactively participating in shaping international institutions and norms (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026a, pp. 118–120, 169). Strategic autonomy is thus understood in terms of proactively creating favorable conditions for the country rather than merely responding to developments in the external environment.

Accordingly, the trajectory of independence and autonomy → self-reliance and self-strengthening → proactive international integration → enhanced strategic autonomy does not represent the replacement of an established principle with a new concept. Rather, it reflects the development of the means through which the nation's right to self-determination is exercised under new conditions. From this perspective, strategic autonomy both inherits the core of Ho Chi Minh's thought on independence and autonomy and introduces new requirements for strengthening national capabilities, enhancing resilience, and expanding Vietnam's capacity to act in a changing international environment.

3.2. Multilateralization, Diversification, and the Expansion of Strategic Policy Space

Another important manifestation of the development of strategic autonomy lies in the way Vietnam organizes and expands its external relations. If autonomy is understood as the capacity to preserve the ability to choose, a state is unlikely to maintain a broad range of choices if its external relations are excessively concentrated on a single partner, market, or relational structure. Multilateralization and diversification, therefore, are not merely orientations for expanding external relations; they also constitute means of managing dependence and dispersing strategic risks.

The 14th National Congress continues to affirm the policy of multilateralizing and diversifying external relations; proactively and actively pursuing deep, comprehensive, and effective international integration; and being a friend, a reliable partner, and a responsible member of the international community. Over the course of the reform process, Vietnam has established diplomatic relations with 195 countries and developed a network of strategic partners, comprehensive strategic partners, and comprehensive partners. This network should be understood not merely as an outcome of the expansion of external relations, but also as a resource that creates a broader range of options

for safeguarding national interests (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026a, pp. 54, 118–120; Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026b, p. 318).

In relations with major powers, strategic partners, and centers of power, strategic autonomy requires maintaining stable and mutually beneficial relations while avoiding situations in which a relationship with one partner narrows the scope of relations with others. This approach does not imply mechanically balancing relations among countries or maintaining equal distance from all sides. The central issue is to preserve the capacity for self-determination within each relationship, manage overlapping interests through a flexible approach, and prevent any single relationship from becoming a condition that determines the entirety of Vietnam's foreign policy choices.

At the multilateral level, Vietnam's increasingly substantive participation in ASEAN, the United Nations, APEC, and regional and interregional mechanisms both expands avenues for cooperation and provides additional channels through which Vietnam can safeguard its interests and participate in shaping the international environment. The 14th National Congress emphasizes the need to enhance Vietnam's position and role in multilateral mechanisms and to proactively and actively participate in shaping multilateral institutions. This represents an important development in the way autonomy is exercised: from a position primarily oriented toward adapting to existing rules toward proactively participating in the formation of cooperative frameworks and rules relevant to the country's interests (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026a, pp. 120, 169; Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026b, pp. 145, 318).

This approach bears a clear resemblance to Ho Chi Minh's thought on expanding international relations. His principle of "being friends with all democratic countries and not antagonizing anyone" reflects an open and flexible approach that avoids placing the country in a position of international isolation (Minh, 2011d, p. 256). Under contemporary conditions, however, this principle has been developed on a broader foundation: international relations serve not merely to secure support for the revolutionary cause, but also to create a multi-

layered strategic policy space in which Vietnam has greater room for maneuver in economic, political, scientific and technological, security, and development affairs.

Multilateralization and diversification at the 14th National Congress should therefore be understood as integral components of strategic autonomy. The greater the diversity of external channels and the more proactively a state participates in multilateral mechanisms, the greater its capacity to mitigate risks arising from excessive dependence on a single partner or relational structure. Expanding external relations does not therefore diminish autonomy; when appropriately managed, the diversification and expansion of external relations create greater policy space for exercising autonomy.

3.3. Combining Endogenous Strength with International Resources

If multilateralization and diversification create policy space for choice, national capabilities determine the extent to which that space can be effectively utilized. This is the most direct point of connection between Ho Chi Minh's thought and contemporary strategic autonomy thinking. Ho Chi Minh stated: "National strength is the gong, while diplomacy is its sound. The larger the gong, the louder the sound" (Minh, 2011c, p. 147). In his view, diplomacy could not substitute for national strength; at the same time, diplomacy could help create the environment and conditions necessary to strengthen that national strength. The relationship between internal and external resources was therefore one of mutual reinforcement rather than a choice between the two.

The 14th National Congress develops this line of thinking under conditions in which development resources have become increasingly internationalized. The Resolution and other Congress documents identify science, technology, innovation, and digital transformation as important drivers of development, while emphasizing the need to mobilize, unlock, and effectively utilize all available resources and to combine endogenous strength with the strength of the times. In foreign policy, this requirement is reflected in the promotion of economic diplomacy, science and technology diplomacy, trade

diplomacy, and digital diplomacy, as well as in expanded cooperation with partners possessing technological, commercial, and innovation capabilities (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026a, pp. 118–120, 169–170).

An important point is that international resources within the framework of strategic autonomy are not viewed as substitutes for weak domestic foundations; rather, they must be mobilized on the basis of strengthening endogenous capabilities. The attraction of capital, technology, knowledge, markets, and other international resources can enhance autonomy only when Vietnam possesses the capacity to receive, absorb, transform, and deploy those resources in pursuit of its own development objectives. Economic integration, scientific and technological cooperation, and participation in global value chains therefore simultaneously require stronger enterprises, higher-quality human resources, greater technological capabilities, more effective institutions, and greater economic resilience.

This perspective reveals an important development in the understanding of national strength. If, in Ho Chi Minh's thought, national strength constitutes the foundation upon which diplomacy can operate effectively, under contemporary conditions national strength is not merely a pre-existing condition of external relations; it is also created and strengthened through the process of proactive international integration itself. International relations, when organized around national interests and the capacity for autonomy, become a resource for enhancing national power. Conversely, excessive dependence on external resources in the absence of sufficient endogenous capabilities may create new sources of vulnerability.

The combination of internal and external resources must therefore be understood dialectically: endogenous strength provides the foundation for autonomy; external resources supplement and reinforce endogenous strength; and stronger endogenous capabilities, in turn, expand the capacity to mobilize external resources proactively. This perspective also explains why the 14th National Congress simultaneously emphasizes strategic autonomy, self-reliance,

and self-strengthening alongside proactive international integration, expanded cooperation, and participation in shaping multilateral institutions.

Taken together, these three dimensions reveal a coherent logic in the development of strategic autonomy within the foreign policy of the Communist Party of Vietnam at the 14th National Congress: from protecting the right to self-determination to building the capacity to exercise that right; from safeguarding independence and autonomy to expanding the space for strategic choice; and from relying on national strength to proactively combining national capabilities with international resources in order to further strengthen national power. This constitutes the point of connection between Ho Chi Minh's thought and contemporary foreign policy thinking. Strategic autonomy, therefore, does not mean withdrawing from the world in an attempt to meet all national needs independently; rather, it means possessing sufficient capabilities to engage deeply with the world while safeguarding national interests, preserving strategic choices, and acting proactively in pursuit of the country's strategic objectives.

4. Discussion and Issues Arising

The preceding analysis suggests that strategic autonomy should be understood in a dialectical relationship with international integration, national capabilities, and the capacity to implement foreign policy. This approach raises three issues that require continued conceptual clarification.

First, strategic autonomy does not mean self-sufficiency. In a world characterized by increasingly deep interdependence, eliminating external dependencies altogether is neither feasible nor consistent with the requirements of development. The issue is not to eliminate dependence, but to manage dependencies, limit forms of dependence that may be transformed into sources of pressure, and preserve the capacity for choice in matters of strategic significance. This is particularly important for an highly open economy such as Vietnam. Multilateralization and diversification of external relations, expansion of partnerships, and enhanced resilience therefore constitute important means of reducing vulnerability to external shocks.

Second, strategic autonomy must be built on the foundation of national capabilities. Ho Chi Minh's view that "National strength is the gong, while diplomacy is its sound. The larger the gong, the louder the sound" remains methodologically relevant under contemporary conditions (Minh, 2011c, p. 147). Political resolve and the will for autonomy become genuine capabilities for autonomy only when translated into economic, scientific and technological, defense and security, institutional, and human-resource capabilities. A country with a strong external position but limited endogenous capabilities will find it difficult to sustain independent strategic choices over the long term. Strategic autonomy is therefore not merely a matter for the foreign policy apparatus; it is fundamentally connected to the overall capabilities of the state and the quality of national development.

Third, a major challenge lies in the gap between policy orientation and implementation capacity. The documents of the 14th National Congress frankly identify a number of limitations in external relations and international integration, including limited capacity for strategic forecasting; insufficient coordination among different forces, sectors, and localities; external-affairs resources and personnel that do not yet fully meet new requirements; and delays in implementing certain international commitments (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026a, pp. 69–70; Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026b, pp. 149–150, 194, 338). These limitations point to a deeper issue: strategic autonomy cannot be secured merely by establishing the right policy orientation; it must be translated into the capacity to forecast, make decisions, and act in a coordinated, timely, and effective manner. The gap between objectives and implementation capacity is therefore an important measure of the extent to which strategic autonomy thinking is being translated into practice.

From this perspective, the value of strategic autonomy does not lie in creating a condition of standing "outside" relationships of dependence, but in the capacity to proactively manage dependencies, strengthen national capabilities, and preserve the capacity for choice in strategic situations. This is also an issue

that requires further clarification in the process of concretizing the foreign policy orientation of the 14th National Congress.

5. Conclusion

Ho Chi Minh's thought on independence and autonomy provides a consistent foundation centered on the nation's right to self-determination, self-reliance, self-strengthening, the development of national capabilities, and the proactive expansion of relations with the outside world. Within this framework, independence cannot be separated from national capabilities; self-reliance and self-strengthening do not imply isolation; and the expansion of international relations must be linked to safeguarding national interests and the nation's right to self-determination. These principles retain enduring methodological value for Vietnam's foreign policy thinking.

On this foundation, the foreign policy of the Communist Party of Vietnam at the 14th National Congress develops the requirements of independence and autonomy under new international conditions by placing strategic autonomy, self-strengthening, and self-confidence within the goals of national development and linking them with a foreign policy based on independence, autonomy, self-strengthening, multilateralization, diversification, and deep, comprehensive, and effective international integration (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026). This development is reflected in a shift from protecting the right to self-determination toward enhancing the capacity to exercise that right; from safeguarding independence and autonomy toward expanding the space for strategic choice; and from relying on national capabilities toward proactively combining national capabilities with international resources to strengthen the country's overall power.

Therefore, strategic autonomy does not mean withdrawing from the world; it means enhancing the capacity to participate proactively in, make choices within, and help shape the international environment on the basis of safeguarding national interests. In this sense, strategic autonomy thinking at the 14th National Congress can be understood as a development of the thinking on

independence and autonomy under new conditions, while also requiring continued efforts to strengthen national capabilities and enhance implementation capacity so that autonomy in policy orientation is translated into autonomy in action.

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