

PATRIOTISM AND NATIONAL SPIRIT IN HO CHI MINH'S FOREIGN POLICY THOUGHT

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Abstract:

This article provides an in-depth analysis of Ho Chi Minh's foreign policy thought, emphasizing the central role of patriotism and the national spirit in shaping and developing his diplomatic strategy. While firmly committed to the ideals of proletarian internationalism and Marxism-Leninism, Ho Chi Minh consistently placed national interests as the top priority, considering them the guiding principle of foreign affairs. The paper outlines Ho Chi Minh's flexible application of patriotic thought across three key periods: his early years abroad, his leadership of the struggle for national independence, and the resistance against the United States. The author highlights how Ho Chi Minh harmoniously combined genuine nationalism with internationalism, Marxist theory with pragmatic political principles, and class interests with national interests. His foreign policy thought is recognized as a synthesis of scientific reasoning, revolutionary spirit, and practical value—providing a lasting ideological foundation for Vietnam's contemporary foreign policy.

Keywords: Ho Chi Minh Thought, Patriotism, National Spirit.

Patriotism and national spirit are the ideological foundation and driving force throughout the revolutionary career of President Ho Chi Minh, most notably reflected in his foreign policy thought. Although he was an international communist fighter, Ho Chi Minh always placed the interests of the nation above all else, considering this the supreme principle in the formulation and implementation of diplomatic policies. Exploring the patriotic spirit and nationalism within his foreign policy provides an essential basis for creatively applying and further developing these values in today's era of deep international integration.

1. Patriotism and National Spirit – The Root of Ho Chi Minh’s Foreign Policy Thought

Ho Chi Minh was a prominent leader of the international communist and workers’ movement, a passionate advocate for proletarian internationalism and the interests of the working class. However, the cornerstone of his worldview remained patriotism and the national spirit, which went hand in hand with the principle of placing national interests above all else. His analysis of global developments was aimed at identifying Vietnam’s position in the world and understanding the characteristics of international relations, in order to navigate a path for the Vietnamese revolutionary movement. For him, science was to serve the revolution—more specifically, the cause of national liberation, independence, reunification, and the building of a prosperous and strong country. Thus, Ho Chi Minh’s thought—already strong due to its scientific foundation—became even more powerful because it was deeply rooted in national traditions and derived its legitimacy from serving national interests.

Though a communist and internationalist activist, above all, Ho Chi Minh was a deeply patriotic individual, as reflected in his chosen name “Ai Quoc” (Patriot). Throughout his life, he dedicated himself to the cause of national independence, freedom, and unification. Patriotism and nationalism were the primary driving forces behind the revolutionary activities of Nguyen Ai Quoc – Ho Chi Minh. He once stated: “At first, it was patriotism, not yet communism, that led me to believe in Lenin and the Third International”¹. He recognized the invincible strength of patriotism in his famous quote: “Our people have a passionate love for the country. That is a precious tradition. Whenever our nation is invaded, this spirit becomes even more fervent, forming a powerful wave that sweeps away all dangers and hardships, drowning all traitors and invaders”².

¹ Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Complete Works*, Vol. 12, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, p. 563.

² Ho Chi Minh, *Complete Works*, *ibid.*, Vol. 7, p. 38.

Ho Chi Minh's approach to nationalism and national interest can be seen evolving through three major stages, each with specific characteristics.

In the early period of his activities abroad, it was patriotism and national spirit (collectively referred to as nationalism) that led him to Marxism-Leninism. As a leader in the international communist movement, Nguyen Ai Quoc stated: "Nationalism is a great driving force of the country... At present, nothing can be done for the Annamese people if not based on the fundamental and unique driving forces of their social life"³. Though he was an international communist, Ho Chi Minh always prioritized love for the homeland and the people. Notably, his nationalist stance was not always well understood or accepted within the international communist movement at the time. He even faced difficulties and accusations of nationalist deviation during his international and domestic activities⁴. Nevertheless, he remained steadfast in his goal of national liberation. Once he had grasped the "handbook" of revolution, he was determined to return to Vietnam and lead the struggle for independence.

In 1941, after returning to Vietnam to assume leadership of the revolutionary movement and prepare for seizing power, Ho Chi Minh's commitment to national interests became increasingly ingrained among Vietnamese communists. He asserted: "At this moment, the interest of national liberation is paramount"⁵. He further emphasized that fulfilling national interests would pave the way for realizing class interests. On the eve of the August Revolution of 1945, he taught: "At this moment, the interests of any group or class must be subordinated to the survival of the nation. If we cannot resolve the issue of national liberation, cannot secure independence and freedom for the whole nation, then not only will the people continue to suffer oppression and exploitation, but the rights of any group or class cannot be reclaimed even in ten thousand years"⁶.

³ Ho Chi Minh, *Complete Works*, *ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 511–513.

⁴ See Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁵ Ho Chi Minh, *Complete Works*, *ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 230.

⁶ *Collected Party Documents*, Vol. 7, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 2000, p. 113.

During the anti-American resistance war, out of the need to build unity, Ho Chi Minh constantly upheld the principles of internationalism and solidarity. However, within the country, as some cadres became preoccupied with ideological and class struggles, he reaffirmed the importance of national interest, stressing the need for “strong national spirit”⁷. He advised: “Whatever we do must serve the national interest”⁸ and “We must always act in the interest of the nation”⁹.

For Ho Chi Minh, national interest was also a criterion for distinguishing between friend and foe, for uniting and dividing forces. He proclaimed: “Anyone who works for the benefit of our people and our Fatherland is our friend. Anyone who harms the people and the country is our enemy. Within ourselves, thoughts and actions that benefit the country and the people are friends, while those that harm them are enemies. Therefore, we must strengthen our allies both inside and outside, and resolutely fight against enemies both external and internal”¹⁰.

2. The Harmonious Integration of Marxism-Leninism and Patriotism in Ho Chi Minh’s Foreign Policy Thought

For Ho Chi Minh, Marxism-Leninism, while emphasizing the interests of the proletariat, did not preclude the pursuit of national interests. National interests, in his view, must be realized through the creative application of Marxism-Leninism to specific national conditions. Writing for Soviet readers, he emphasized: “We need a correct revolutionary line and a correctly-led party of the proletariat. That line can only be the Marxist-Leninist line, applied creatively to the concrete conditions of the nation”¹¹. In certain circumstances, he believed that the particular conditions of a given country would determine the

⁷ Ho Chi Minh, *Complete Works*, *ibid.*, Vol. 9, p. 265.

⁸ President Ho Chi Minh’s speech at the 1964 Diplomatic Conference: Archival materials, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam.

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ Ho Chi Minh, *Chronological Biography*, Vol. 6, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 2007, p. 18

¹¹ Ho Chi Minh, *Complete Works*, *ibid.*, Vol. 14, p. 608.

appropriate course of action—and that, too, was consistent with Marxism. As he famously stated: “Opposing the Soviet Union—this can also be Marxist”¹².

Notably, Ho Chi Minh often reminded us that all countries act in accordance with their own national interests. He observed that what is commonly called the “everyone minds their own business” attitude was entirely natural. He asserted: “Other countries look after their interests; we must look after ours”¹³. This revealed a deep understanding of the nature of nationalism and the pursuit of national interest.

A correct understanding of the relationship between national interests and class interests in international relations is another core element of Ho Chi Minh’s foreign policy thought. Importantly, for Ho Chi Minh, there was no inherent conflict between genuine nationalism and true internationalism. He once stated: “When their nationalism (referring to the Vietnamese) triumphs, most of the world will already have been Sovietized, and then, certainly, that nationalism will transform into internationalism”¹⁴.

In the context of tensions within the international communist and workers' movement, on August 3, 1956, Ho Chi Minh published an article titled *Strengthening and Developing the Ideological Unity of Marxist-Leninist Parties* in the Soviet newspaper *Pravda*. There, he introduced a creative argument regarding the link between national and class interests: “In the current international situation, the national characteristics and specific conditions of each country have increasingly become important factors in shaping the policy of every communist and workers’ party... At the same time, our Party understands that it is impossible to confine our present and future activities within a purely national framework. Our activities are bound by thousands of threads to the common struggle of the progressive forces of the world”¹⁵.

¹² Ho Chi Minh, *Chronological Biography*, *ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 538.

¹³ Ho Chi Minh, *Complete Works*, *ibid.*, Vol. 4, p. 121.

¹⁴ Ho Chi Minh, *Complete Works*, *ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 513.

¹⁵ Ho Chi Minh, *Complete Works*, *ibid.*, Vol. 10, p. 401.

Ho Chi Minh's foreign policy thought was rooted in Marxism-Leninism, national traditions, and patriotism, while selectively absorbing other theoretical currents—especially the realist school of international relations, both in theory and practice. Fundamentally, the realist approach asserts that in the anarchic nature of international relations, states must prioritize their own national interests, particularly when conflicts of interest frequently arise. Strengthening national power is the most effective way for a state to safeguard its interests. Therefore, great powers—those with superior economic and military strength—are not only better positioned to defend their interests but also capable of shaping the rules and institutions of the international system to ensure their interests are respected. In other words, material strength allows major powers to determine their place in the system and set the rules that reflect their status.

This leads to the conclusion that changes in the international landscape, system, and order must begin with shifts in the balance of power among nations—especially between the great powers. Perhaps the most famous expression of this realist logic is British statesman Lord Palmerston's 19th-century assertion that “nations have no permanent friends or enemies, only permanent interests.” In this view, ideology should not be the primary factor in assessing global affairs or formulating foreign policy; instead, ideological loyalty must yield to vigilance and strategic flexibility. Even though class interests matter, national interests must take precedence, and power balancing should guide policy.

The key ideas, principles, and guiding mottos such as “Maintain the unchanging in response to myriad changes,” “Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom,” “More friends, fewer enemies,” and “Combine national strength with the strength of the times,” along with the call for “self-reliance”¹⁶ - which constitute the crystallization of Ho Chi Minh's ideological system in international relations and foreign policy - are, in many respects, the result of a selective adoption and creative development of realist political

¹⁶ Ho Chi Minh stated: “*If we want others to help us, we must first help ourselves*” (*Complete Works*, Vol. 2, p. 320), and “*We must liberate ourselves by our own strength*” (*ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 596)

principles, as previously analyzed. These thoughts, principles, and mottos were concretely expressed through policies implemented in different historical periods and became the underlying cause of Vietnam's diplomatic victories since 1945, including in confrontations with powerful adversaries such as France and the United States. As the Party has affirmed: "In our struggle for liberation, of course we must seek allies, even if they are temporary, unstable, and conditional; but the work of liberation must primarily be carried out by ourselves".

Thus, the analysis of international relations based on the international system and global order, as introduced above, aligns closely with the dialectical materialism and historical materialism approach of Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh's thought on foreign policy—especially in its emphasis on the decisive nature of material forces and the interactive relationships among elements within a system. This includes the reciprocal relationship between the superstructure and the economic base, in which the latter plays a decisive role.

On the one hand, this approach promotes the realism of the nation-centered political perspective, in which national interests serve as the foundation for evaluating international relations and formulating foreign policy. On the other hand, it harmoniously and effectively integrates ideology, class interests, and national interests, merging Marxism-Leninism with patriotism in the specific context of Vietnam. This convergence highlights the scientific, revolutionary, and practical nature of Ho Chi Minh's foreign policy thought.

Conclusion

Ho Chi Minh's foreign policy thought reflects a profound synthesis between traditional patriotism and modern revolutionary spirit, between national interests and proletarian internationalism. He not only inherited and creatively developed Marxism-Leninism in accordance with Vietnam's unique conditions, but also emphasized the centrality of national interests in conducting international relations. The seamless integration of ideals and pragmatism, of

ideology and national interest, constitutes a distinctive feature of Ho Chi Minh's foreign affairs philosophy.

This body of thought not only shaped Vietnam's diplomatic trajectory in the past but continues to illuminate the path for safeguarding independence, sovereignty, and advancing international integration in the present. It stands as a profound lesson in flexibility, initiative, and steadfastness in defending national interests—anchored in a solid theoretical foundation and the enduring cultural-historical traditions of the Vietnamese nation.

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