Russian-Vietnamese Relations and the Joint Fight Against the Pandemic

The history of relations between Russia and Vietnam goes back to Soviet times when the USSR supported the Vietnamese communists in their war for creating their state, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). After that, the Soviet Union became a major partner of the SRV for many years. The common ideology, joint opposition to the West, and the need to contain China, with which both the USSR and SRV had very tense relations in the second half of the twentieth century, contributed to the convergence of the two states in all major spheres. Thus, the USSR had its own military base in the SRV, and the SRV had up to 70% of its foreign trade with the USSR. Friendly relations between the two countries lasted until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

When its successor, the Russian Federation, replaced the USSR, it maintained friendly relations with Vietnam. In 1994, the countries signed the Treaty on the Fundamentals of Friendly Relations. However, practical cooperation has been dramatically reduced, including in the trade and economic sphere. But after the economic crisis of the 1990s passed, the Russian Federation has been restoring economic cooperation with the SRV since the beginning of the 21st century.

In 2001, Russia and Vietnam signed a Declaration on Strategic Partnership. In 2012 this partnership was declared comprehensive, and in 2015 an agreement on a free trade zone between Vietnam and the Eurasian Economic Union was signed, in which Russia plays a key role. In 2016, the agreement came into force, and the volume of Russian-
Vietnamese trade began to grow rapidly. In 2020, the mutual trade turnover between Russia and SRV exceeded $5.6 billion.

All this time, there has also been interaction between the two states in the political sphere. Vietnam supports the Russian Federation on significant issues of the international political agenda. There is an active Russian-Vietnamese dialogue at a high level, high-level visits are exchanged, and negotiations on new agreements are underway.

At the end of 2018, a delegation of the State Duma of the Russian Federation visited the SRV. Representatives of the Russian parliament met with Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc and Chairperson of the country’s National Assembly Nguyễn Thị Kim Ngân. Discussing trade, economic and humanitarian cooperation between the Russian Federation and SRV, the sides noted that Russian education is still valued in Vietnam, just as in Soviet times. At that time, about 5 thousand Vietnamese citizens were studying at Russian universities. It was also stated that tourism is an up-and-coming field for Russian-Vietnamese cooperation. Thus, a record number of tourists, more than 600,000, from Russia visited Vietnam in 2018. The negotiators decided to increase this figure to 1 million by 2020.

In honor of the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty on the Fundamentals of Friendly Relations, which was celebrated in 2019, as well as the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations, which was celebrated in 2020, 2019 was declared the Cross Year of Russia and Vietnam. About 600,000 Russian tourists revisited Vietnam in 2019.

At the end of 2019, Nguyễn Thị Kim Ngân, Chairperson of the country’s National Assembly of the SRV, visited Russia to attend the first meeting of the Inter-parliamentary Commission of Russia and Vietnam on Economic and Political Cooperation. The parties discussed plans to increase trade between Russia and Vietnam to $10 billion a year and also voiced the idea of switching to local currencies instead of the US dollar in Russian-Vietnamese trade. This was due to the threat of American economic sanctions, which Washington never stops preparing against both Russia and Vietnam.

Unfortunately, the above-mentioned plan to bring the annual number of Russian tourists in Vietnam to the level of 1 million people has not yet been implemented. The reason for this is the coronavirus pandemic that began in late 2019 and would spread across the globe in 2020.

In March 2020, Vietnam closed its borders to foreign tourists. As a result, only 192,000 Russian citizens visited the SRV instead of the usual 600,000. Of course, it dealt a powerful blow to the Vietnamese tourism industry. However, these were necessary losses that the Vietnamese government was forced into to save its citizens’ lives and health.

Fighting the spread of the disease has become another essential area of Russian-Vietnamese cooperation.

In late March 2021, the media reported that the Ministry of Health of Vietnam had registered the Russian Covid-19 vaccine Sputnik V. And the registration was carried out in an accelerated way during the EUA (emergency use authorization) procedure. Vietnam is one of the most developed countries in Southeast Asia and has one of the largest populations in the region, about 97.3 million people. The fact that the Vietnamese leadership has entrusted the protection of its citizens to a Russian drug shows the high level of confidence of the SRV in both Russia and its medical technology. Also of note is the fact that, with over 90% efficacy and minimal allergenicity, Sputnik V is moderately priced, which is also vital for less affluent countries with large populations.

However, Vietnam did not stop at registering and purchasing the Russian vaccine. It decided to set up its licensed production on its territory. In July 2021, the media reported that thanks to the joint efforts of the Russian Direct Investment Fund and Vabiotech, one of the leaders in the Vietnamese pharmaceutical industry, the first test batch of the drug was produced in the SRV. The vaccine was sent to Moscow to be tested at the Gamaleya National Research Center for Epidemiology and Microbiology to ensure that the vaccine, produced using Russian technology in Vietnam, is not inferior to the Russian-made vaccine. The quality control test was passed successfully.

In September 2021, the first regular batch of Sputnik V was ready, which was also checked by Russian specialists and made a positive conclusion.

However, Vietnam can’t supply the vaccine to its entire population; therefore, it has to purchase a certain amount of the vaccine from Russia. The country received the first 739,000 doses of Sputnik V purchased from Russia at the end of September. Under the existing agreement, Vietnam will receive 40 million doses until June 2022.

Finally, the mass vaccination of the Vietnamese population with Sputnik V began in October 2021. To begin with, the drug was delivered to three vaccination sites in Ho Chi Minh City, the country’s largest city with a population of about 8 million people.
Thus, despite the global economic downturn caused by the pandemic, which has also affected Russian-Vietnamese cooperation, the two countries continue to actively cooperate, develop trade and scientific and technological links and thus strengthen their strategic partnership.

*Dmitry Bokarev, political observer, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*