

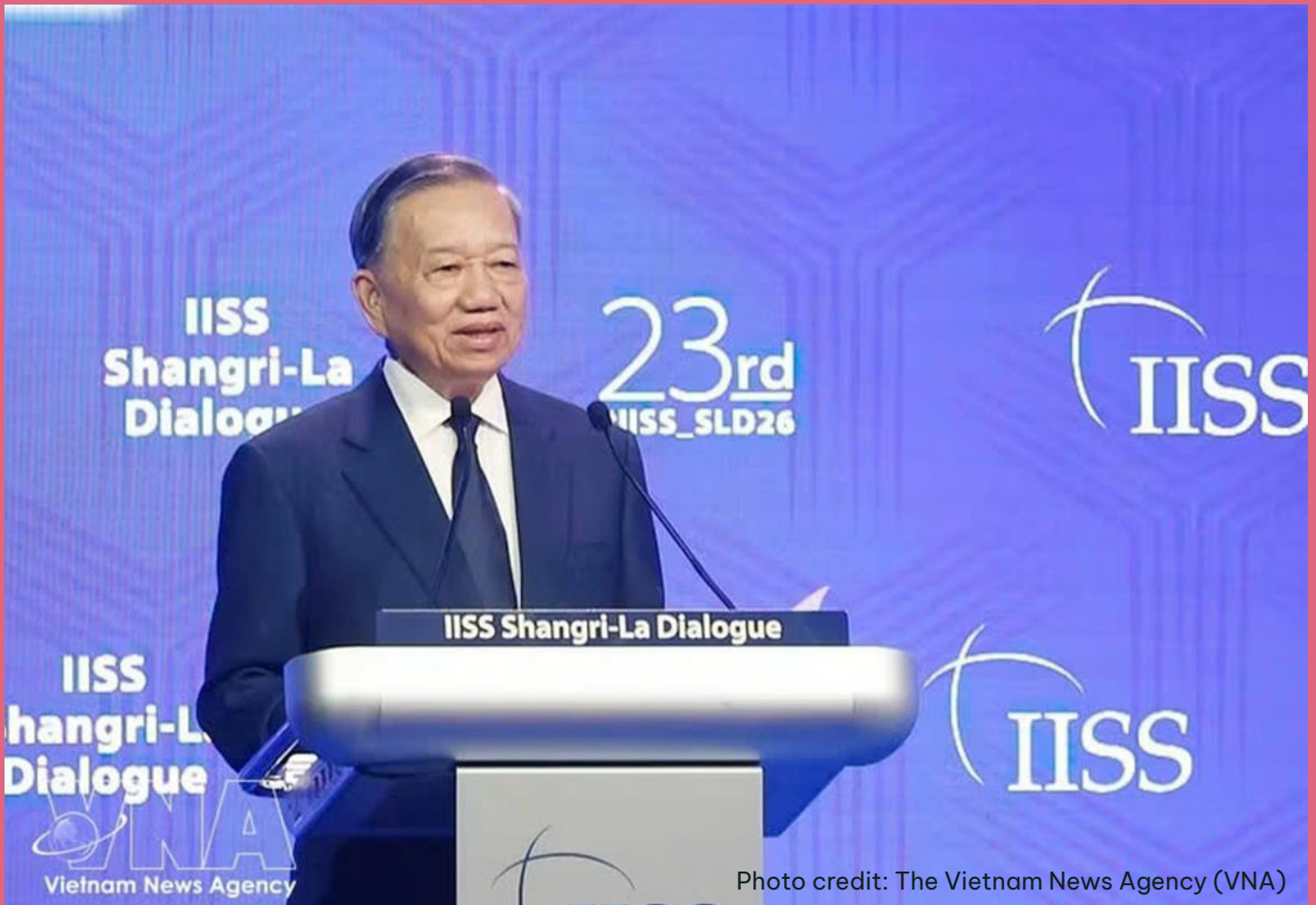


Australia Vietnam
Policy Institute

AVPI FELLOWS PROGRAM

The Shaping of Tô Lâm's Foreign Policy: The evolution of Vietnam's bamboo diplomacy

Author: Dr Huong Le Thu



A middle power with a big outlook

On the evening of 29 May 2026, Tô Lâm delivered the opening keynote of the 23rd Shangri-La Dialogue, the [first General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam invited to do so](#). The forum in Singapore was his first major foreign policy speech to an important regional and global audience of defence and foreign policy establishment from across the Indo-Pacific.

He delivered. The sombre speech acutely diagnosed the state of the global landscape. Tô Lâm framed the present moment around [three converging crises](#): an erosion of international order in which power increasingly overrides commitment, a crisis of the development model as growth slows and climate pressures mount, and a crisis of trust among states. Against this he set out a vision pitched deliberately at the middle and smaller powers – that these crises are not destiny, that rules and dialogue must be made genuinely effective rather than selectively invoked, and that small and medium-sized states should not be forced to [choose sides or be subjected to economic, technological and security coercion](#). **It was a vision of Vietnam not merely navigating great-power competition but speaking for a constituency caught within it. A claim to a voice in shaping the regional order rather than only adapting to it.**

The timing of that claim is not incidental. This year Vietnam marks forty years of Đổi Mới, the reforms initiated in 1986 that opened a struggling command economy under the pressure of necessity and set the country on its path from poverty to manufacturing hub. What Tô Lâm is now attempting amounts to a second opening, premised this time on the country's ascent rather than survival. His foreign policy is the outward face of that ambition, and the Shangri-La keynote is its clearest single expression. After taking over the Party in August 2024, and consolidating his position at the [14th Party Congress in January 2026](#), he pursued an active foreign policy role. Embracing the principles that his predecessor, Nguyễn Phú Trọng, captured as bamboo diplomacy – firm roots but flexible branches that represent the resilience of a smaller country that is not easily snapped under the pressure of major powers, but flexible in its external partnerships. However, Tô Lâm's version already seems much more active. The growing confidence with which Vietnam now presents itself regionally and globally. The explanation lies less in any new strategic theory than in how authority has been reorganised at the top of the system.

From the outset, Tô Lâm promised a much more pragmatic outlook than his predecessor both in domestic and external matters. He also holds a more concentrated mandate. At the 14th Congress he was [reelected General Secretary after securing an exemption from the Party's customary retirement age and was elected state president as well](#), folding together two posts that successive leadership of Vietnam had deliberately kept separate for four decades. Having earlier overseen the long anti-corruption campaign that reshaped the Party and rising through the Ministry of Public Security before reaching its summit, he brings a directness to governing and a readiness to reorganise institutions rather than defer to them.

Even before the Party Congress, he pushed through the most sweeping administrative overhaul in decades – [ministries cut from twenty-two to fourteen, provinces roughly halved, on the order of 150,000 official positions removed](#). This was motivated both from reducing corruption opportunities of the heavy bureaucracy as well as streamlining procedures to ease the foreign investment. Such a massive undertaking shows that he is not afraid to challenge the status quo.

A diplomacy of returns

Tô Lâm's first challenge was to respond to the ever-changing politics of the U.S. and the flurry of tariffs. After [three earlier attempts to arrange direct talks with the Trump administration had come to nothing](#), his February 2026 visit was staged with unusual message discipline. He attended the inaugural session of the U.S.-led Gaza peace board, secured the White House meeting, and arrived with visible rebalancing in hand – commercial agreements reported at more than thirty billion dollars, a large Boeing order among them, aimed squarely at American concerns about Vietnam's trade surplus. Tô Lâm came away with [Vietnam's removal from certain U.S. export-control lists](#), a tangible gain in access to advanced technology, and an issued [invitation to Trump to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation \(APEC\) summit Vietnam will host in 2027](#) – an event that now anchors the relationship in a forward-looking frame.

From a rules-taker to a rules-shaper?

Vietnam is becoming an increasingly relevant voice in regional matters and Tô Lâm aims to seize that moment. The clearest instance is the [ASEAN Future Forum](#), a Vietnamese initiative first proposed at the 2023 ASEAN Summit and convened in Hanoi each year since. Vietnam's first large-scale multilateral platform in the [Track 1.5 format](#), bringing leaders, scholars and business together to debate the bloc's direction. Its 2026 edition, held in Hanoi this June, is materially larger than its predecessors, with the agenda reaching into [energy security, artificial-intelligence governance and the long-term shape of the ASEAN community](#). Notably, the outcomes of earlier forums have been folded into formal ASEAN summit documents, so the platform feeds the official process rather than running parallel to it.

The ambition this reflects is a familiar one in Hanoi's own language: a move from participating in the regional order toward helping to shape it. Hosting the APEC summit in 2027 belongs to the same logic, as does the readiness to convene rather than merely attend. For a middle power, convening is leverage. It sets agendas, builds relationships, and lends Vietnam a standing disproportionate to its weight. **The bamboo, in other words, is not only bending with the wind; it is increasingly trying to influence which way the wind blows.**

The pattern holds across his other travels, where the choreography is as telling as the destinations. Tô Lâm made Beijing the destination of his first trip as Party leader, and returned after his reappointment – gestures that reassure the larger neighbour and stabilise the relationship that matters most to Hanoi. Before the Shangri-La keynote he visited Bangkok, a key neighbour, and continued his tour to Manila after Singapore. The visit to the Philippines – the first by a Vietnamese Communist Party General Secretary – produced an upgrade to an enhanced strategic partnership with a fellow South China Sea claimant that is also a U.S. treaty ally, and a joint call for disputes to be settled without the use of force. The sequencing carries the argument: the deference to Beijing and the deepening with Manila are not in tension, because Vietnam is not choosing between them. It is widening its options and extracting value from each. The principles are the familiar ones – diversified partnerships, no alliances, no taking sides – but they are now executed at a speed and with a confidence that lets Hanoi seize openings a slower process might have let slip.

But as Tô Lâm himself warned from the Shangri-La stage, the world he is navigating is beset by concurrent crises, and Vietnam’s exposure to them is real. The trade understanding with Washington remains a work in progress – a twenty-percent tariff on Vietnamese goods and a steeper rate on suspected transshipment, complicated further by an American court ruling that has thrown much of the tariff regime into legal doubt. Vietnam’s position in the supply chains that link the United States and China is both an asset and an exposure, and trade is likely to remain the sharpest point of friction with Washington for some time. The skill Tô Lâm has shown so far does not make the underlying vulnerability disappear.

Under Tô Lâm, Vietnam is likely to be more visible, more proactive and more willing to act on its own initiative than it has been in a generation. **The bamboo foreign policy is deepening its root system to keep the country grounded in the turbulent times ahead.**



Dr. Huong Le Thu (or Le Thu Hương) is Chair of the Australia Vietnam Policy Institute’s Advisory Board. She is also Deputy Director of the Asia Program at the International Crisis Group, and nonresident Fellow with the Southeast Asia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC. Previously, she held a senior position at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute’s Defense and Strategy Program.

Dr. Le Thu has also worked at the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, and the Institute of International Relations in Taiwan.

Dr. Le Thu is a renowned public intellectual and expert on Vietnam, Southeast Asia and broader geopolitics. Her academic publications have appeared in journals such as *The Asian Security*, *The Asia-Pacific Review*, and *The Asian Policy*, and her opinion pieces have appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *Financial Times*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Nikkei Asian Review*, *The Australian Financial Review*, *Straits Times*, and *Japan Times*, among others.

Dr. Le Thu holds a PhD from the National Chengchi University in Taiwan. She speaks five languages and has published in four.



AVPI Fellow

Dr Huong Le Thu
Chair of AVPI Advisory Board

