

НАУЧНЫЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ

ВНУТРИПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЕ ПРОЦЕССЫ И ВНЕШНЯЯ ПОЛИТИКА

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VIETNAM-UNITED STATES RELATIONS: GROWING STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE

Abstract. This article presents an overview of United States-Vietnam relations from 2013 to the present with a focus on defence engagement.

This article is divided into four parts. Part one provides a brief historical overview of relations from the end of American military involvement in Vietnam in 1973 to 2013. Part two reviews the evolution of bilateral defence relations under the Obama Administration. Part three discusses bilateral relations under the Trump Administration that reflect continuity with past policy rather than abrupt change. The conclusion argues that although there is a growing convergence on strategic issues between Vietnam and the U.S. their strategic interests are not congruent.

Key words: Vietnam, United States, relations, defence, Obama Administration, Trump Administration.

Background

In January 1973, the United States and the three Vietnamese parties signed the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring the Peace in Vietnam¹. All sides committed themselves to a cease-fire while the U.S. agreed to withdraw all its military forces within sixty days. Under Article 21, the United States agreed to “contribute to healing the wounds of war and to postwar reconstruction of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam).”

After the withdrawal of U.S. military forces the ceasefire broke down and in 1975 the communist-led Vietnam People’s Army swept to victory in an offensive that led to the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975. The following year Vietnam was politically reunified under the name Socialist Republic of Vietnam. For the next twenty years the obligations of both parties to meet

¹ Namely, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (“Viet Cong”). The text of the 1973 Agreement may be consulted at https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2001/10/12/656ccc0d-31ef-42a6-a3e9-ce5ee7d4fc80/publishable_en.pdf.

their obligations under Articles 8 and 21 of the 1973 Agreement proved a major obstacle to the normalization of relations.

In July 1995, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam normalized diplomatic relations with the United States and joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as its sixth member. Nonetheless, bilateral relations between Washington and Hanoi were slow to develop. The United States accorded highest priority to the return of all prisoners of war (POWs) and a full accounting for all personnel missing in action (MIAs). Eventually Vietnam agreed to treat the full accounting of POWs and MIAs as a humanitarian issue. And the United States continued until 1994 to maintain an embargo on trade with Vietnam dating from 1964.

In 2001 the two countries reached a bilateral trade agreement and in 2007 they signed a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA). It was only in 2003 that both countries agreed to initiate a triennial exchange visits by defence ministers on an alternate basis. In 2009, the United States made its first naval port visit to Vietnam. The following year Vietnam and the U.S. initiated their first annual Defense Policy Dialogue at deputy defence minister level.

In 2011, Vietnam and the United States signed a landmark Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Advancing Bilateral Defense Cooperation at the 2nd Defense Policy Dialogue. The MOU set out five priority areas for cooperation: maritime security, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, exchanges between defense universities and research institutes, and UN peacekeeping operations. This MOU remains the foundation for U.S.-Vietnam defence engagement up to the present.

Bilateral relations under the Obama Administration

Relations between Vietnam and the United States markedly improved during President Obama's second and last term in office. Four major developments underscored this trend. First, in July 2013, Vietnam and the United States adopted the Joint Statement on Comprehensive Partnership during the state visit by President Truong Tan Sang to Washington [Joint Statement Obama-Sang 2013]. The joint statement included nine area of cooperation, including defence and security². The two leaders expressed their satisfaction with the implementation of the 2011 MOU, agreed to continue their annual Defense Policy Dialogue as well as the separate Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue, and to expand efforts to enhance Vietnam's capabilities in search and rescue (SAR) and disaster response.

With respect to security cooperation, the joint statement declared: The Presidents also underscored the importance of enhanced cooperation in non-traditional security matters and agreed to work more closely to counter terrorism; enhance maritime law enforcement cooperation; combat transnational crime including piracy, and narcotics, human, and wildlife trafficking; and address high-tech crime and cyber security. President Barack Obama welcomed Vietnam's decision to participate in United Nations peacekeeping operations and emphasized the United States' desire to assist with training and other support for this effort through the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI) [Joint Statement Obama-Sang 2013].

The United States was quick to follow up on President Obama's commitment to assist Vietnam's capability in SAR. In October 2013, the heads of the U.S. and Vietnam coast guards met

² The other areas included: political and diplomatic relations, trade and economic ties, science and technology, education and training, environment and health, war legacy issues, protection and promotion of human rights, and culture, sports, and tourism.

and identified search and rescue as one of their priorities. In December 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry announced that the United States would provide \$18 million in new assistance to Vietnam to enhance the capacity of its Coast Guard units to deploy rapidly for search and rescue, disaster response, and other activities.

In October 2014, the U.S. State Department announced the lifting on the sale of lethal weapons to Vietnam on a case-by-case basis. This partial lifting of arms sales was restricted to defence articles related to maritime security and was aimed at improving Vietnam's maritime domain awareness and maritime security capabilities. This decision met, in part, Vietnam's long-standing request that the United States lift restrictions on arms sales included in its International Trafficking in Arms Regulations (ITAR) adopted in the 1980s. Vietnam, nevertheless, continued to press for the removal of all restrictions.

In June 2015, defence engagement between Vietnam and the United States was taken to a new level when Vietnam's Minister of National Defence General Phung Quang Thanh and his U.S. counterpart Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter adopted the Joint Vision Statement on Defense Cooperation. This statement outlined twelve areas of cooperation.

The Joint Vision Statement on Defence Cooperation basically codified cooperative activities that were already being undertaken under the framework of the 2011 MOU. However, the inclusion of defense trade and possible cooperation in co-production of defence technologies and equipment was a significant new development.

The following month bilateral relations between Vietnam and the United States reached a turning point with the historic visit of Nguyen Phu Trong, the Secretary General of the VCP, to Washington to meet with President Obama at the White House. After their meeting the two leaders issued a Joint Vision Statement in which they affirmed "their continued pursuit of a deepened, sustained, and substantive relationship on the basis of respect for the United Nations Charter, international law, *and each other's political systems*, independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity (emphasis added)" [U.S.-Viet Nam Joint Vision Statement 2015].

In fiscal year 2015-16 (October 1-September 30), the United States allocated \$40.1 million to Vietnam under the Maritime Security Initiative for the purchase of maritime defence equipment to be used in training, maritime intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, command and control in its maritime enforcement agencies, as well as humanitarian assistance/disaster relief exercises to promote interoperability.

In 2016, the last year of President Obama's second term in office, the scope of defence engagement between the United States and Vietnam was underscored by cooperative activities in eight areas: English language training, exchange visits, defence industry collaboration, UN peacekeeping, maritime domain awareness, war legacy, military medicine, naval capacity building.

The capstone in U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relations was set in May 2016 when President Barack Obama made an official visit to Vietnam at the invitation of his counterpart, President Tran Dai Quang. Prior to their meeting Obama announced the lifting of all ITAR restrictions on arms sales. Vietnam's leaders welcomed this decision.

After their meeting, the two presidents issued a joint statement that summarized progress in their bilateral relations under the comprehensive partnership [U.S.-Viet Nam Joint Statement 2016]. The joint statement highlighted their commitment to continued collaboration in eight areas: humanitarian cooperation (recovery of MIA remains), war legacy (unexploded ordnance disposal

and dioxin remediation)³, maritime security, United Nations peacekeeping (assistance for Vietnam's first deployment in Sudan), humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, security and defence cooperation, combating transnational crime, and cyber security. During Obama's visit officials from both sides signed a letter of intent to establish a working group for the Cooperative Humanitarian and Medical Storage Initiative (CHAMSI) to consider prepositioning supplies in Vietnam to deal with disaster relief and humanitarian assistance.

During 2016, Vietnam's leaders became increasingly concerned by rhetoric emanating from the U.S. presidential campaign. Candidate Donald Trump pledged to withdraw the United States from the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) multilateral trade agreement as one of his first acts if he took office. He also accused Vietnam of stealing jobs from Americans. Candidate Hillary Clinton's lukewarm and equivocal stance on TPP ratification proved equally unsettling.

Vietnam was a keen supporter of the TPP because it would give Vietnam preferential access to the United States, its biggest export market. In 2016, two-way trade reached an all time high of \$52 billion dollars (up from \$451 million in 1995). U.S. exports to Vietnam grew by 77 percent between 2014-2016 making Vietnam the United States' fastest growing export market. U.S. exports to Vietnam in 2016 reached \$10 billion. However, there was one fly in the ointment, in 2016 Vietnam exported \$42 billion to the United States, giving it a trade surplus of \$32 billion. Vietnam ranked sixth after China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Germany, on the list of countries having a trade surplus with the United States.

In order to allay their concerns, Hanoi dispatched Dinh The Huynh, a member of the Politburo and standing member of the VCP Central Committee's Secretariat, to Washington in October for consultations with Obama Administration officials. Huynh informed his American hosts that Vietnam's National Assembly was preparing to ratify the TPP and called on the United States to accelerate its ratification. Huynh also expressed the hope that the United States "will soon recognise Vietnam's economy as a market economy, open its market to more Vietnamese agricultural products, and reduce trade barriers" [Relations with CPV: 26.10. 2016].

Bilateral relations under the Trump Administration

Vietnam's relations with the United States were further consolidated during President Trump's first year in office through high-level exchange visits.

Vietnam's Prime Minister Visits Washington. On January 23, 2017, three days after he assumed office, President Trump issued an Executive Order withdrawing the United States from the TPP [Presidential Memorandum: 23.01.2017]. This was a major disappointment to Vietnam's leadership. But Vietnam readjusted swiftly and successfully engineered an invitation from the White House for Prime Minister Phuc to make an official visit to Washington, the first by a government leader from Southeast Asia.

On 31 May 2017, President Trump met with Prime Minister Phuc in the Oval Office. At the conclusion of their half hour meeting the two leaders issued a joint statement reaffirming their commitment "to chart an agenda for United States-Vietnam relations, building on the positive

³ During the Vietnam War the United States sprayed Agent Orange to defoliate jungle areas. Agent Orange stored at Da Nang and Bien Hoa airbases leached dioxin and contaminated the soil. During Obama's visit, Vietnam and the U.S. had just begun the final phase of dioxin remediation in Da Nang. During Obama's visit agreement was reached to clean up dioxin contamination at Bien Hoa.

momentum of the Comprehensive Partnership between the two countries” adopted by the Obama Administration [Joint Statement for Enhancing 2017]. It was obvious that detailed consultations had occurred prior to this meeting as the joint statement outlined in detail their agreed agenda for future cooperation. Both sides addressed the concerns of the other. When the two leaders met Phuc told Trump that Vietnam would create “favorable conditions for foreign companies, including those of the United States, to do business and invest in Vietnam; protecting and enforcing intellectual property; and bringing its labor laws in line with Vietnam’s international commitments” [Joint Statement for Enhancing 2017]. Trump noted Vietnam’s interest in acquiring market economy status and agreed to set up a bilateral working group to consult on this issue.

Trump and Phuc skirted around the issue of Vietnam’s trade surplus and together “affirmed the importance of promoting bilateral trade and creating favorable conditions for the businesses of both sides, particularly through the effective use of the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement to address issues in United States-Vietnam relations in a constructive manner” [Joint Statement for Enhancing 2017].

The joint statement contained lengthy sections on cooperation in defence, and the South China Sea. Trump and Phuc pledged to strengthen defence cooperation in line with the 2011 MOU and 2015 Joint Vision Statement. They took note of the “recent transfer to Vietnam of a Hamilton-class Coast Guard cutter,” while Phuc “expressed interest in acquiring more defense equipment from the United States, including additional Coast Guard cutters” [Joint Statement for Enhancing 2017]. The two leaders “looked into the possibility of a visit to a Vietnamese port by a United States aircraft carrier and discussed steps to further cooperation between the naval forces of the two countries” [Joint Statement for Enhancing 2017].

On the question of illegal immigrants, according to the joint statement, Prime Minister Phuc affirmed that Vietnam will work actively with the United States to expeditiously return Vietnamese nationals subject to final orders of removal, using the 2008 United States-Vietnam Agreement on the Acceptance of the Return of Vietnamese Citizens as a basis. The two leaders pledged to set up a working group to discuss this issue [Joint Statement for Enhancing 2017].

There was a marked convergence of views on the South China Sea. The joint statement included a lengthy exposition that blended the views of both parties:

President Trump and Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc affirmed that the South China Sea is a waterway of strategic significance to the international community. The two sides also affirmed full support for the peaceful resolution of disputes without the threat or use of force or coercion, in accordance with international law, including full respect for diplomatic and legal processes, and called upon all parties concerned to implement their international legal obligations in good faith in any resolution to these disputes. They highlighted the importance that parties refrain from actions that would escalate tensions, such as the militarization of disputed features. President Trump stressed that the United States will continue to fly, sail, and operate anywhere international law allows [Joint Statement for Enhancing 2017].

Finally, the joint statement touched on other areas of cooperation included in the 2013 comprehensive partnership including human rights and environmental issues and climate change mitigation. Both leaders reaffirmed support for ASEAN and the Lower Mekong Initiative.

Vietnam’s Defence Minister Visits Washington. General Ngo Xuan Lich, Minister of National Defence, visited Washington from 7-10 August to meet with his counterpart Secretary of Defense James Mattis. According to readout of their meeting issued by The Pentagon, the Secretary

and the Minister of Defense agreed to deepen defense cooperation, including by expanding maritime cooperation. The Ministers also directed their staffs to work toward arranging first carrier visit to Vietnam once technical conditions permit.

President Trump Makes Official Visit to Vietnam. President Trump made an official visit to Vietnam from 11-12 November after addressing the APEC Leaders' Meeting in Da Nang. Trump was received in Hanoi by his counterpart, President Quang, and held talks with three other top leaders: Prime Minister Phuc, Chairman of the National Assembly Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, and party Secretary General Trong.

The two presidents issued a 14-point joint statement that reiterated many of the issues included in the much longer joint statement between Trump and Phuc issued in May. The November 2017 joint statement for the first time included reference to promoting "peace, cooperation, prosperity, and security in the *Indo-Pacific region* (emphasis added)" [U.S.-Viet Nam Joint Statement November 2017].

U.S. Secretary of Defense Visits Vietnam. Defense Secretary Mattis made his first official trip to Vietnam from 24-25 January 2018. On arrival in Hanoi Mattis first met with the Defense POW-MIA Accounting Agency. On the same day Vietnam and the United States inaugurated the first phase of dioxin remediation at Bien Hoa airport outside Ho Chi Minh City. Mattis met his counterpart General Lich on 25 January. Secretary Mattis also met with Secretary General Trong as well as President Quang. The Vietnamese media reported that Trong "suggested both sides address war consequences, including bomb and mine clearance, environmental detoxification, humanitarian aid and search for soldiers missing in actions and strengthen mutual trust and understanding to further develop bilateral ties" [Vietnam treasures: 07.02.2018].

The media also reported that President Quang asked the US to coordinate with Vietnam in carrying out dioxin contamination project at Bien Hoa airport, deliver the next Hamilton-class patrol vessel to Vietnam in 2019, and support Vietnam in launching a level-2 field hospital to the UN peacekeeping mission in South Sudan in 2018.

The consolidation of U.S.-Vietnam relations under the Trump Administration is remarkable because it was unexpected. Clearly the growing convergence of strategic interests between Washington and Hanoi has served to dampen potential friction over trade and other differences. For example, the U.S. *National Security Strategy* issued in late 2017 singled out Vietnam (along with Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore) as a growing security and economic partner [National Security Strategy 2017].

Conclusion

Since diplomatic normalization in 1995, relations between Vietnam and the United States have evolved gradually. As late as 2002, for example, the VCP Central Committee considered that China was a friend while the United States was Vietnam's strategic enemy [Central Committee Resolution 2002]. The following year the VCP Central Committee revised this assessment by placing greater emphasis on national interests over ideology. The Central Committee now declared that Vietnam would cooperate with states that respected Vietnam's national interests and Vietnam would struggle against states that harmed Vietnam's national interests. This new approach adopted the dialectic concepts of "objects of cooperation" (Đối tác) and "objects of struggle" (Đối tượng) to justify this new orientation [Central Committee Resolution 2003. In sum, the United States was no

longer a strategic enemy but a potential partner of cooperation. This development signalled Hanoi's recognition of the growing convergence of strategic interests with the United States.

Over the next decade Vietnam and the United States managed to accommodate contentious issues arising from the Vietnam War.

Vietnam and the United States negotiated a bilateral free trade agreement and a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement. The United States became Vietnam's largest export market.

The congruence of strategic interests was reinforced by Vietnam's emergence as an important diplomatic partner. For example, Vietnam supported ASEAN unity and centrality and played a constructive role in ASEAN-centric organisations. Vietnam hosted the inaugural meeting of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus and supported U.S. membership in the East Asia Summit. Vietnam also played a positive role as non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (2008-09)⁴. Further, in 2014 Vietnam backed the U.S. Proliferation Security Initiative's Statement of Interdiction Principles.

However, no issue was more important in shaping the congruence of strategic interests between Vietnam and the United States than maritime disputes in the South China Sea. Both countries shared an interest in maritime security, including freedom of navigation and over flight. Both shared the same policy position that territorial disputes should be settled peacefully without the threat of use of force on the basis of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Both supported the full implementation of the Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and a legally binding Code of Conduct.

Despite growing strategic convergence U.S. and Vietnamese interests are not congruent [Thayer 2012]. For example, the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president brought trade issues and U.S. protectionism to the fore. Instead of Vietnam's planned smooth sailing into the TPP with enhanced access to the U.S. market, Vietnam now faces a prolonged series of negotiations leading to a new "free and fair" bilateral trade agreement.

Even in the area of defence and security cooperation, where U.S. and Vietnamese strategic interests have increasingly converged, their interests are not congruent. Vietnam has a defence policy of "three no's" — no alliances, no foreign bases, and no joining a second country to gang up on a third country [Vietnam National Defence 2009]. Senior Vietnamese officials welcome the presence of the U.S. Navy in the South China Sea as long as it contributes, in their view, to regional peace and stability. Vietnam will host the first visit of a U.S. aircraft carrier this year, for example. But Vietnam has so far refrained from participating in military exercises with the U.S. Navy.

Vietnam will not sign on to the Trump Administration's national security and defence strategies and join an anti-China coalition. Vietnam may quietly welcome the emergence of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, a nascent security arrangement involving the U.S. Japan, India and Australia, because of its potential role to counter-balance China. But Vietnam is unlikely to join the Quad. Vietnam prefers to leverage off differences between Beijing and Washington in what one Vietnamese diplomat called the "Goldilocks formula," that is, Vietnam prefers relations between China and the U.S. to remain "not too hot, not too cold" [Thayer 2012].

Vietnam and the United States are both wary of Sino-Russian collaboration in the Indo-Pacific. But Vietnam will not cooperate with the United States to oppose Russian revisionism

⁴ Vietnam and the United States shared similar views in the United Nations on international issues such as nuclear non-proliferation, countering violent extremism, and mitigating the effects of climate change.

because it has close political and defence relations with Moscow.⁵ The United States views competition by China and Russia as its main strategic threat, whereas Russia is Vietnam's most important defence partner. Russia currently provides eighty-eight percent of Vietnam's arms purchases. Russian naval vessels have been given special access to the military port at Cam Ranh Bay, while the other major powers are permitted annual visits to other ports such as Haiphong, Da Nang, the civilian-run Cam Ranh International Port and Ho Chi Minh City.

Further, Vietnam seeks to leverage its strategic partnerships with the major powers to bolster its foreign policy of independence and self-reliance. Vietnam wants each major power to have equity in Vietnam's development. Vietnam does not want to be drawn into the orbit of any major power. So Vietnam leverages its relations with each major power by playing an independent and constructive role in regional affairs; if any major power fails to support Vietnam's autonomy it will risk Vietnam being pulled into a rival's orbit.

In sum, Vietnam and the United States share a growing convergence of strategic interests but these interests are not congruent. Vietnam is content to structure its bilateral relations under the framework of the 2013 Joint Statement on Comprehensive Partnership and the 2015 Joint Vision Statement on Defence Cooperation. A close reading of these documents indicates that defence cooperation has been largely confined to the five areas of cooperation listed in the 2011 MOU on defence cooperation. Vietnam will continue to welcome enhancing its comprehensive partnership with the United States so long as its priority interests are addressed but only at a pace it is comfortable with.

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⁵ In 2015 Vietnam's defense policy of "three no's" was put under strain when Russian military refueling aircraft at Cam Ranh Bay serviced Bear bombers that conducted provocative flights near U.S. military facilities on Guam. Carlyle Thayer. Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay Caught in US-Russia Crossfire. *The Diplomat*, March 13, 2015. URL: <http://thediplomat.com/2015/03/vietnams-cam-ranh-bay-caught-in-us-russia-crossfire/>.

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**ВЬЕТНАМО-АМЕРИКАНСКИЕ ОТНОШЕНИЯ:
РАСТУЩЕЕ СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКОЕ СБЛИЖЕНИЕ**

Аннотация. В статье представлен обзор военного сотрудничества США и Вьетнама с 2013 г. по настоящее время.

Статья содержит четыре раздела. В первом представлен краткий исторический обзор отношений двух стран с конца американского вмешательства во Вьетнаме в 1973 по 2013 гг. Во втором рассматривается эволюция отношений США-СРВ в военной области при администрации Б. Обамы. В третьем разделе анализируются двусторонние отношения при администрации Д. Трампа, показывающей скорее преемственность с политикой прошлой администрации, чем резкое ее изменение. В заключении автор выражает мнение, что, несмотря на растущее сближение между Вьетнамом и США в стратегических вопросах, их долговременные интересы не совпадают.

Ключевые слова: Вьетнам, США, отношения, оборона, администрация Б. Обамы, администрация Д. Трампа.

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