



TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

THE VIETNAM-US SECURITY PARTNERSHIP AND THE RULES-BASED INTERNATIONAL ORDER IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

Le Hong Hiep

ISEAS
YUSOF ISHAK
INSTITUTE

ISSUE

1

2020

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Published by: ISEAS Publishing
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614
publish@iseas.edu.sg
<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

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ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Names: Le, Hong Hiep.

Title: The Vietnam-US security partnership and the rules-based international order in the age of Trump / Le Hong Hiep.

Description: Singapore : ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, February 2020. | Series: Trends in Southeast Asia, ISSN 0219-3213 ; TRS1/20 | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: ISBN 9789814881548 (paperback) | ISBN 9789814881555 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Vietnam—Military relations—United States. | United States—Military relations— Vietnam. | National security—Vietnam. | National security—United States. | International organization.

Classification: LCC DS501 I59T no. 1(2020)

Typeset by Superskill Graphics Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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The Vietnam-US Security Partnership and the Rules-based International Order in the Age of Trump

By Le Hong Hiep

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Vietnam-US relations have kept strengthening since bilateral normalization in 1995, including in the defence and strategic domains. This has turned the two countries into increasingly important security partners for each other.
- The shared perception of the China threat, especially in the South China Sea, provided the strongest momentum towards bilateral strategic rapprochement in recent years despite the strategic uncertainties generated by the Trump administration. Such strategic dynamics also shaped Vietnam's supportive view of the US-led regional and global orders.
- In the short to medium term, challenges for bilateral relations include the further improvement of mutual trust and the building up of Vietnam's capacity to participate in more substantive defence cooperation initiatives with the United States. In the long run, how to balance its strengthening ties with Washington and the troubling yet important relationship with Beijing remains a challenge for Hanoi.
- Vietnam's support for the US-led rules-based international order should remain persistent, but will vary depending on the shifting dynamics in Vietnam's relations with China as well as Sino-US strategic competition.

The Vietnam-US Security Partnership and the Rules-Based International Order in the Age of Trump

By Le Hong Hiep¹

INTRODUCTION

Stepping out of the shadow of the past, Vietnam-US relations have seen new horizons since the two Cold War enemies normalized ties in 1995. In 2013, Hanoi and Washington entered into a “comprehensive partnership”, marking a new era of bilateral relations in which the two sides strengthened their ties beyond the economic domain. Currently, the two sides are considering upgrading their relations to the level of “strategic partnership”. The steady progress in bilateral cooperation, especially in the defence and strategic domains, has surprised regional observers and brought new substance to the relationship. Vietnam and the United States have indeed become important security partners, with each country playing an increasingly important role in the other’s security policy.

This article analyses the Vietnam-US security relationship with a focus on Vietnam’s perception of the relationship and the role that Hanoi would like Washington to play in its security policy. It is arguably

¹ Le Hong Hiep is Fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. The article is based on research supported by Sasakawa Peace Foundation. The author would like to thank Dr Ryo Sahashi, Professor Evelyn Goh and participants at the workshop on “World Views on the United States, Alliances, and International Order” for their valuable comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of the article.

their common perception of the China threat, especially in the South China Sea, which has added the strongest momentum to their strategic rapprochement in recent years. Due to this common interest in managing China's rise and its increasing maritime assertiveness, bilateral ties have continued to grow steadily despite the strategic uncertainty generated by the Trump administration. At the same time, such strategic dynamics have also led Vietnam to maintain its supportive view of the US-led regional and global orders. This position of Hanoi will likely stay unchanged in the near future.

The article starts with an overview of the foundations of the Vietnam-US security partnership, followed by an analysis of the role of the United States in Vietnam's national security strategy. It then reviews the key issues in their bilateral security partnership and discusses Vietnam's perception of US power under the Obama and Trump administrations. It concludes by assessing Vietnam's perception of the rules-based international order and the role of the United States in this order.

FOUNDATIONS OF THE VIETNAM-US SECURITY PARTNERSHIP

Among the major allies and security partners of the United States in Asia, Vietnam is perhaps the most special one given the two countries' recent history of extreme hostility as well as their rival ideologies. After the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, despite initial efforts, the two countries failed to achieve diplomatic normalization due to Vietnam's insistence on war reparation from the United States, Washington's shifting strategic calculations vis-à-vis Vietnam and China, and Vietnam's military interference in Cambodia in late 1978. The United States tightened its trade embargo and diplomatic sanctions on Vietnam during the 1980s, and Hanoi continued to consider Washington a major enemy. It was not until the early 1990s when Vietnam began economic reforms under the banner of *Doi Moi* (Renovation) and the Cambodian conflict was resolved in 1991 that bilateral relations began to improve. However, due to the POW/MIA issues, it took the two countries another three years before bilateral ties witnessed major progress. On 3 February 1994, President Bill Clinton lifted the US trade embargo on Vietnam, and on

11 July 1995, the two countries announced full diplomatic normalization, ushering in a fresh chapter in their relationship.²

After normalization, bilateral ties grew rapidly, especially in the economic domain. In 2000, the two countries concluded a Bilateral Trade Agreement, which helped bilateral trade expand significantly. The United States has since become Vietnam's largest export market. For example, according to the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, Vietnam's exports to the United States in 2018 amounted to US\$47.5 billion, accounting for 19.5 per cent of its total exports. Meanwhile, US exports to Vietnam also increased 36.5 per cent in the same year to reach US\$12.7 billion.³ At the same time, the United States was Vietnam's eleventh largest foreign investor with the accumulative stock of registered capital reaching US\$9.35 billion by end 2018.⁴ President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in early 2017 has presented new challenges for bilateral economic ties but the momentum for economic cooperation remains strong. During President Trump's visit to Vietnam in November 2017, the two sides pledged to continue deepening and expanding bilateral trade and investment through formal mechanisms, especially the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) signed in 2007.

Although economic cooperation remains an anchor for bilateral relations, political and strategic ties have also witnessed major progress over the past two decades. Four recent sitting presidents of the United States have visited Vietnam, including President Bill Clinton in 2000, President George W. Bush in 2006, President Barrack Obama in 2016, and President Donald Trump in 2017. Vietnamese leaders have also visited Washington on a frequent basis. In June 2005, Mr Phan Van Khai

² For an analysis of the contours of bilateral normalization, see Phuong Nguyen, "The Evolution of Strategic Trust in Vietnam-U.S. Relations", in *Vietnam's Foreign Policy under Doi Moi*, edited by Le Hong Hiep and Anton Tsvetov (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), pp. 47–71.

³ General Statistics Office, *Statistical Yearbook of Vietnam 2018* (Ha Noi: Statistical Publishing House, 2019), pp. 593–94.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

became the first prime minister of Vietnam to pay an official visit to the United States since the end of the Vietnam War. Other Vietnamese top leaders who have visited America include President Nguyen Minh Triet in 2007 (the first Vietnamese president to do so), Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung in 2008, President Truong Tan Sang in 2013, Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong in 2015, and Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc in 2017. In particular, the visit by Mr Trong to Washington was considered a historical landmark in bilateral ties as he was the first general secretary of the CPV to ever set foot in the United States, signifying an unprecedented show of mutual trust between the two former enemies.

The announcement of the US-Vietnam “comprehensive partnership” in 2013 was another landmark in bilateral relations. Under the partnership, the two sides sought to promote nine areas of cooperation: political and diplomatic relations; trade and economic ties; science and technology; education and training; environment and health; war legacy issues; defence and security; protection and promotion of human rights; and culture, sports, and tourism.⁵ The establishment of the comprehensive partnership has also facilitated the expansion of bilateral ties into hitherto “sensitive” areas of cooperation, such as security and defence. In particular, the two sides concluded in 2011 a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Advancing Bilateral Defence Cooperation, which was later supplemented by a Joint Vision Statement on Defence Relations announced in June 2015. The statement called for, among other things, an expansion of defence trade between the two countries, “potentially including cooperation in the production of new technologies and equipment, where possible under current law and policy restrictions”.⁶

⁵ The White House, “Joint Statement by President Barack Obama of the United States of America and President Truong Tan Sang of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam”, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/25/joint-statement-president-barack-obama-united-states-america-and-preside>.

⁶ Aaron Mehta, “New US-Vietnam Agreement Shows Growth, Challenges”, *DefenseNews*, 2015, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/policy-budget/budget/2015/06/01/us-vietnam-joint-vision-statement-signed-in-hanoi/28291963/>.

During President Trump’s visit to Vietnam in November 2017, the two countries adopted the 2018–20 Plan of Action for US-Vietnam Defence Cooperation to implement the 2011 MOU and the 2015 Joint Vision Statement. They also announced a plan to “deepen and gradually expand security and intelligence cooperation, enhancing information sharing and joint training on issues of mutual concern”.⁷ On the same occasion, the two sides also discussed the plan for a visit by a US aircraft carrier to Vietnam. Accordingly, from 5 to 9 March 2018, the USS *Carl Vinson* made a port call at Da Nang and became the first American aircraft carrier to visit Vietnam after the Vietnam War. While largely symbolic, the visit was yet another significant indication of the accelerating strategic rapprochement between the two countries.

In 2013, Washington pledged to provide US\$18 million for Vietnam to purchase patrol vessels with. The US also included Vietnam in the Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative (MSI) announced by Defence Secretary Ashton Carter at the Shangri La Dialogue in May 2015. According to the Initiative, the United States would provide US\$425 million to assist the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia in enhancing their maritime capacity. In November 2015, the White House further elaborated on the plan, saying that it would seek to increase its maritime programme assistance for Vietnam to US\$19.6 million in financial year (FY) 2015 and US\$20.5 million in FY 2016 to help Vietnam bolster its maritime Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR), and command and control within its maritime agencies.⁸

In October 2014, the Obama administration decided to partially lift a long-standing ban on lethal weapon sales to Vietnam. Two years later,

⁷ The White House, “Joint Statement between the United States of America and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam”, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/11/12/joint-statement-between-united-states-america-and-socialist-republic>.

⁸ The White House, “Fact Sheet: U.S. Building Maritime Capacity in Southeast Asia”, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/17/fact-sheet-us-building-maritime-capacity-southeast-asia>.

during his visit to Hanoi in May 2016, President Obama announced the full lifting of the ban. In turn, at his meeting with Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc in Hanoi in November 2017, President Trump suggested that Vietnam buy military gears, aircraft and missiles from American manufacturers. Since then, no arms deal has been formally announced. However, in early August 2018, the *Voice of America* reported that “Vietnam had military equipment contracts worth US\$94.7 million with the US” under the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) and Direct Commercial Sales (DCS) programmes.⁹ These programmes helped Vietnam further improve its maritime capacity to deal with security challenges in the South China Sea. For example, in May 2017, Hanoi received six Metal Shark fast patrol boats worth US\$18 million funded by US aid for its Coast Guard. In the same month, a decommissioned US Coast Guard Hamilton-class cutter was also transferred to Vietnam.¹⁰ In February 2019, US Indo-Pacific Command chief, Admiral Phil Davidson, said that Vietnam was acquiring equipment from the United States, including Boeing Insitu ScanEagle unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), Beechcraft T-6 Texan II trainer aircraft and a second decommissioned US Coast Guard cutter. One month later, a Boeing official revealed that the company was close to sealing a deal to sell Vietnam the Insitu ScanEagle, a small, long-range, low-altitude reconnaissance UAV built by Insitu, a Boeing subsidiary.¹¹ It therefore appears that actual acquisition of US military equipment and even weapon systems by Vietnam is just a matter of time.

In sum, Vietnam-US relations have strengthened steadily since the two countries achieved diplomatic normalization in 1995. While economic

⁹ VOA Vietnamese, “Việt Nam ‘Đặt Mua’ Gần Trăm Triệu Đôla vũ Khí Mỹ”, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ieUdhHgxC>.

¹⁰ USNI News, “Former U.S. Cutter Morgenthau Transferred to Vietnamese Coast Guard”, 2017, <https://news.usni.org/2017/05/26/former-u-s-cutter-morgenthau-transferred-vietnamese-coast-guard>.

¹¹ Vu Anh, “Boeing official says Vietnam military drone deal almost done”, *VnExpress*, 29 March 2019, <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/boeing-official-says-vietnam-military-drone-deal-almost-done-3901778.html>.

cooperation remains the most important pillar of the relationship, security and defence ties have also expanded and increasingly gained substance. What explains such a strategic rapprochement between the two former enemies, especially from a Vietnamese perspective?

AMERICA'S ROLE IN VIETNAM'S NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

Since Vietnam launched its economic reforms under *Doi Moi* in 1986, the country has been pursuing a foreign policy of “diversification and multilateralization”. Militarily, after Russia’s withdrawal from Cam Ranh naval base, the country has maintained a so-called “three no’s principle”, i.e., no military alliance, no foreign base on Vietnam’s soil, and no relationship with one country to be used against a third country. Specifically, Vietnam’s 2004 Defence White Paper states:

Vietnam’s policy is not to join any military alliance, not to allow any foreign country to establish military base in Vietnam, and not to take part in any military action that uses force or threatens to use force against another country. However, Vietnam is ready to defend itself against any violation of its territory, air space, waters and national interests; Vietnam is not going to undertake arm races, but constantly strengthens its military capabilities for the purpose of sufficient self-defence.¹²

¹² Ministry of National Defence, *Quốc Phòng Việt Nam Những Năm Đầu Thế Kỷ XXI* [Vietnam’s National Defence in the First Years of the 21st Century] (Ha Noi: Ministry of Defence, 2004). In the 2019 defence white paper, Vietnam retained the above “three no’s” and added a fourth: no use of force or threat of force in international relations. Specifically, the paper states that “Viet Nam consistently advocates neither joining any military alliances, siding with one country against another, giving any other countries permission to set up military bases or use its territory to carry out military activities against other countries nor using force or threatening to use force in international relations”. See Ministry of National Defence, “2019 Vietnam National Defence” (Ha Noi: National Political Publishing House, 2019), pp. 23–24.

However, while trying to maintain a diversified foreign policy and a non-aligned strategic posture, Vietnam has been focusing its diplomatic efforts on building ties with the major powers, especially the United States, China, Japan, India and Russia. Among these major partnerships, China has proven to be the most challenging one for Vietnam to manage due to conflicting interests. While Vietnam wants a peaceful and stable relationship with China to maintain its security and economic development, the South China Sea disputes between the two countries have made it necessary for Vietnam to deepen strategic ties with other major powers to balance against China's maritime pressures. This has been the case particularly after the 2014 *Haiyang Shiyou* oil rig crisis sent Sino-Vietnamese relations to the lowest level in decades.¹³

Among the major powers, strengthening strategic ties with the United States is what Vietnam is particularly interested in. From the perspective of Vietnamese strategists, the United States is the only country that has both the necessary power and political will to contain China's strategic ambitions. As such, it is understandable that Hanoi has been keen to strategically engage Washington, especially in the South China Sea. For example, as noted in the previous section, the military assistance that the United States has provided Vietnam so far focuses on strengthening Vietnam's maritime capacity. Moreover, the rising strategic competition between China and the United States means that Vietnam can leverage its strengthened ties with Washington to improve its bargaining position vis-à-vis China in the South China Sea.

As a major arms exporter, the United States can potentially play an important role in Vietnam's military modernization efforts. By 2018,

¹³ The crisis started in early May 2014 when China anchored its deep-water drilling rig *Haiyang Shiyou 981* in Vietnamese EEZ and deployed over eighty vessels, including naval warships, to protect the rig. Vietnam sent naval and law enforcement vessels to the area to prevent the stationing of the rig. During the subsequent standoff, which lasted until July 2014, Chinese ships aggressively rammed and fired water cannons at Vietnamese vessels. The crisis led to two deadly anti-China riots in Vietnam, and created a sense of brinkmanship in the country for weeks.

up to 90 per cent of Vietnam's arms imports were sourced from Russia due to the affordability of Russian weapons as well as the historical ties between the two countries. However, while Moscow remains the most important arms trade partner for Vietnam, Hanoi also wants to diversify its arms sources to reduce its dependency on Moscow, and thus its strategic vulnerabilities, given the rather warm relationship between Moscow and Beijing. Moreover, acquiring arms from the United States can help cement Vietnam-US strategic relations, which is a priority for Hanoi. Towards this end, it was reported that VTA Telecom Corporation, a subsidiary of the Vietnamese military-run Viettel Group, paid a law firm a monthly amount of US\$40,000 to lobby US legislators and government officials on "issues related to Vietnam's national security and defence", and to seize upon America's full lifting of lethal arms sale ban in order to strengthen defence trade between the two countries.¹⁴ It should be noted that Viettel is tasked by the Vietnamese government to lead the development of Vietnam's defence industry. As such, the company's presence in the United States may be related to the bilateral announcement in 2015 that the two countries are considering the co-production of military equipment.

Vietnam's strategic overture has been reciprocated by the United States. Over the past decade, Washington has sought to strengthen its strategic ties with Vietnam, which it sees as an emerging security partner. For example, the US Department of Defence's *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* released in June 2019 stated that "through the implementation of the National Defense Strategy in the Indo-Pacific, the United States is prioritizing new relationships with Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia—key players in ASEAN that remain central in our efforts to ensure peace and underwrite prosperity in the Indo-Pacific".¹⁵ The Report, for some

¹⁴ VOA Vietnamese, "Ông Trump Chào Bán 'Máy Bay, Tên Lửa' ở Việt Nam", 2017, <https://www.voatiengviet.com/a/tong-thong-my-chao-ban-may-bay-va-ten-lua-o-viet-nam/4111716.html>.

¹⁵ Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, 1 June 2019, p. 36.

reason, even named Vietnam before Indonesia and Malaysia in the list of Washington's emerging security partners in Southeast Asia. The rise of China, which has threatened America's regional primacy, appears to be a major driver behind Washington's efforts to strengthen strategic cooperation with Vietnam. As a major country in Southeast Asia with a vibrant economy and a young population, Vietnam is not just an economic opportunity for American businesses. With significant military upgrades over the past decade, Vietnam now boasts one of the most powerful armed forces in Southeast Asia. Moreover, as a major claimant state in the South China Sea with a long history of resistance against China's domination and expansionism, Vietnam can be a key regional player in constraining China's geostrategic ambitions. This also explains why the United States is interested in selling arms to Vietnam. From the perspective of the Trump administration, such arms deals can help create more jobs and exports revenue for America in line with President Trump's mandate to "Make America Great Again". It can also help to reduce Vietnam's trade surplus with the United States which amounted to USD34.78 billion in 2018.¹⁶ At the same time, Vietnam's additional military capabilities align with America's strategic interests in maintaining the regional balance of power against the backdrop of a rising China.

As such, both countries have a deep interest in fostering stronger bilateral strategic ties. For Hanoi, having the United States as a reliable security partner contributes to its overall hedging strategy against China.¹⁷ At present, Vietnam considers its relations with the United States as a "comprehensive partnership"; this is lower than the "comprehensive strategic partnerships" or "strategic partnerships" that it has established with some other major countries. However, the strategic

¹⁶ Vietnam Customs, "Tình hình xuất khẩu, nhập khẩu hàng hóa của Việt Nam tháng 12 và năm 2018" [Vietnam's imports and exports in December and 2018], 15 January 2019, <https://www.customs.gov.vn/Lists/ThongKeHaiQuan/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=1559>.

¹⁷ See, for example, Le Hong Hiep, "Vietnam's Hedging Strategy against China since Normalization", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 35, no. 3 (2013): 333–68.

significance of the United States for Vietnam is well recognized by Hanoi and the “comprehensive partnership” designation does not fully reflect the strategic significance that the two sides accord each other. As a Vietnamese diplomat puts it, strategic cooperation between Vietnam and the US is “highly substantive”,¹⁸ albeit in a low-key manner. In other words, Vietnam has deliberately kept its partnership with America at a lower profile in order not to offend China, given the intensifying strategic rivalry between Beijing and Washington in recent years.

From an “image 2.5” perspective, a stronger relationship with the United States is also critical to Vietnam’s national interests. At the regional level, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) plays a key role in managing not only relations among ASEAN member states but also between themselves and external powers. As such, ASEAN can be seen as one of the pillars of the regional order and by extension, the international order in which Vietnam is operating. Since its accession to ASEAN in 1995, Vietnam has been appreciative of the Association’s role in maintaining regional peace and prosperity. Hanoi has also considered ASEAN as an important venue to promote its foreign policy of “diversification and multilateralization”. However, Vietnam is well aware of ASEAN’s limitations, especially in managing South China Sea disputes, due to ASEAN’s consensus-based decision-making mechanism.¹⁹ As such, while continuing to use ASEAN as a venue to mobilize international support for its foreign policy in general and its South China Sea position in particular, Vietnam has also leveraged its relationships with the major powers to compensate for the limitations of ASEAN in dealing with China. Efforts to deepen ties with the United States can therefore be seen as part of Vietnam’s overall hedging strategy

¹⁸ Online exchange with author, May 2018.

¹⁹ For an analysis of how the principle of consensus constrains ASEAN’s ability to handle regional security issues, including the South China Sea disputes, see Le Hong Hiep, “Can ASEAN Overcome the ‘Consensus Dilemma’ over the South China Sea?”, *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2016/58, 24 October 2016, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2016_58.pdf.

vis-à-vis China. At the same time, Vietnam's role as an emerging security partner of the United States is also contributing to the shifting dynamics of the regional order. In particular, a stronger Vietnam-US partnership helps maintain the regional balance of power and contributes to the maintenance of the existing rules-based international order while facilitating the management of peace and security in the South China Sea against the backdrop of ASEAN's lack of capability to do so.

KEY ISSUES IN BILATERAL SECURITY PARTNERSHIP

The security partnership between Vietnam and the United States has been growing steadily over the past decade. However, although the two sides have made considerable progress in terms of strategic cooperation, certain issues and challenges have prevented the two sides from further strengthening their ties.

First, despite the generally solid foundations of bilateral relations, particularly the positive perception of America by the Vietnamese public (as noted in the next section), there remains a lingering level of distrust between the two sides. The Vietnam War and prolonged post-war hostilities have left a negative legacy on bilateral ties. Even after the two countries normalized relations, many leaders in Hanoi still viewed the United States with suspicion. As Phuong Nguyen observes, “those in Hanoi who were always ambivalent about the United States saw normalization as a precursor for Washington to pressure Hanoi on democracy and human rights issues, and more dangerously, spurring the process of ‘peaceful evolution’ in Vietnam.”²⁰ In the 1990s and 2000s, Washington's frequent criticism of Hanoi's human rights record further reinforced Vietnamese officials' suspicion of America's intention. Vietnamese leaders' reactions show that Vietnam had a different understanding of human rights, and thus found Washington's agenda irrelevant and unhelpful at best. For example, during his visit to Vietnam in 2000, when President Clinton

²⁰ Nguyen, “The Evolution of Strategic Trust in Vietnam – U.S. Relations”, p. 58.

brought up issues of human rights in private meetings with Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong and Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, both the leaders countered that Vietnamese had different definitions of human rights, and that “they had to worry about the rights of Vietnamese to eat and get an education before they moved toward America’s agenda”.²¹

By the early 2010s, despite progress in bilateral ties, such suspicions on the Vietnamese side were still alive. A document prepared by the CPV’s Central Department of Propaganda and Education guiding the implementation of a directive by the CPV Secretariat on “stepping up the fight against the scheme of ‘peaceful evolution’ in the fields of culture and ideology” even identified some US initiatives, such as the Peace Corps,²² the Vietnam Education Fund (VEF) and the Fulbright Economic Teaching Program as parts of its “peaceful evolution” scheme to subvert the CPV regime.²³ As such, until the early 2010s, Vietnamese leaders still sought assurance from their American counterparts that the United States did not harbour any ill intentions towards Vietnam and especially the CPV regime. Such concerns led to the commitment by both sides in 2013 that the two countries would respect “each other’s political systems”.²⁴ This commitment has been repeated in various joint statements issued during subsequent bilateral high-level visits.

Although bilateral trust has improved, the fact that the two countries have different political systems with opposing ideologies remains a

²¹ David E. Sanger, “Huge Crowd in Hanoi for Clinton, Who Speaks of ‘Shared Suffering’”, *New York Times*, 18 November 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/18/world/clinton-vietnam-overview-huge-crowd-hanoi-for-clinton-who-speaks-shared.html>.

²² The Peace Corps is a government-run volunteer organization established in 1961. More information about the organization is available at <http://www.peacecorps.gov/about/>.

²³ Le Hong Hiep, “The Vietnam-US-China Triangle: New Dynamics and Implications”, *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2015/45, 25 August 2015, p. 5.

²⁴ The White House, “Joint Statement by President Barack Obama of the United States of America and President Truong Tan Sang of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam”.

potential sticking point for strategic cooperation. Under the Trump administration, the United States has not emphasized human rights as well as other liberal values, thereby facilitating bilateral rapprochement. However, should subsequent US administrations highlight these issues, bilateral relations may face setbacks. In order to mitigate this issue, Vietnam needs to further improve its human rights record. At the same time, it is also important for the two countries to compartmentalize the human rights issue away from the overall bilateral relationship as well as from their strategic cooperation.

Second, there remains a gap in the two side's capabilities in conducting substantive joint defence cooperation initiatives. Despite its significant force modernization efforts over the past decade, Vietnam still lacks certain technical capacities, experience, and skilled human resources to conduct complex high-profile joint defence initiatives. For example, operational military cooperation has so far been limited to simple humanitarian assistance and disaster relief exercises. To address this issue, the United States has provided some assistance to Vietnam. For example, Vietnamese officers have been sent to America to attend language and technical training programmes. According to the US Department of Defence, Washington has also provided Hanoi with security assistance, including Scan Eagle Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, T-6 trainer aircraft, a former U.S. Coast Guard high-endurance cutter, and small patrol boats and their associated training and maintenance facilities. Numerous annual training exchanges and activities have also been organized to enhance bilateral cooperation and interoperability between the two countries' armed forces.²⁵

Third, an enduring issue that has long constrained bilateral relations is Vietnam's longstanding wish to maintain a strategic balance between the United States and China. Vietnam has been careful not to promote its relations with the United States too fast for fear of being seen as offensive by Beijing. From Hanoi's view, China's geographical proximity and its importance to Vietnam's economic and security well-being mean that

²⁵ Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, p. 37.

a constrained relationship with China will put Vietnam in a precarious strategic position to the extent that even a strong relationship with the United States will not be able to make up for. As such, while trying to deepen ties with Washington, Hanoi tends to keep an eye on Beijing's reactions and adjust its rapprochement with Washington accordingly. In mid-October 2018, for example, Vietnam quietly cancelled 15 defence engagement activities with the United States scheduled for 2019 involving army, navy and air force exchanges. The decision appeared to be one of Hanoi's reactions to the intensifying strategic competition between Washington and Beijing, which made it virtually impossible for Vietnam to forge closer defence ties with one power without being frowned upon by the other. As a consequence, Hanoi tried to keep a low profile in its strategic cooperation with the United States.²⁶ The same reason may have also accounted for Vietnam's hesitation in establishing a strategic partnership with the United States despite Washington's diplomatic and strategic overtures since as early as 2013.

Another latent issue, which has not fully manifested itself but may nevertheless constrain bilateral ties, is the potential mismatch of mutual expectations. So far, China is both a driver and a barrier for bilateral strategic cooperation, especially from a Vietnamese perspective. Hanoi wants to strengthen its bilateral strategic cooperation with Washington to counter China's pressures in the South China Sea and to improve its bargaining position vis-à-vis Beijing. However, it is unrealistic for Hanoi to expect Washington to intervene militarily on its behalf in an armed conflict with Beijing over the South China Sea. After all, Vietnam and the United States are not treaty allies, and despite rising strategic rivalry between Beijing and Washington, China still matters more to the United States than Vietnam. In the same vein, the United States appears to be paying more attention to Vietnam in its strategic calculations vis-à-vis China. As such, should US-China strategic competition continue

²⁶ Le Hong Hiep, "Why did Vietnam Cancel its Defence Engagements with the US?", *ISEAS Commentary*, 2018/103, 11 December 2018, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/medias/commentaries/item/8691-why-did-vietnam-cancel-its-defence-engagements-with-the-us-by-le-hong-hiep>.

to intensify, the United States may at some point expect Vietnam to take a decisive turn towards Washington at the expense of Beijing. However, as noted above, Vietnam is unlikely to adopt such an openly hostile stance against China. Therefore, if the two sides do not have frequent dialogues and interactions to better understand each other's sensitivities and to properly manage mutual expectations, it will be difficult for them to promote bilateral ties sustainably and substantively.

VIETNAM'S PERCEPTIONS OF AMERICA UNDER OBAMA AND TRUMP

Under the Obama and Trump administrations, Vietnam-US relations in general and bilateral strategic cooperation in particular have witnessed significant progress. An important factor that contributed to the momentum of the relationship is the Vietnamese public's positive perception of America and its power.

According to a survey done by the Pew Research Centre in 2014, about three-quarters of Vietnamese (76 per cent) held a favourable opinion of the United States. "More highly educated people (89 per cent) gave the United States especially high marks. Young people ages 18–29 were particularly affirmative (89 per cent), but the United States is seen positively even by those who are old enough to have lived through the Vietnam War. Among those ages 50 and older, more than six-in-ten rated the United States favourably."²⁷

Those surveyed also held a positive view about future bilateral relations, with more Vietnamese choosing the United States than any other country as a partner they could rely on as a dependable ally in the future. This is in stark contrast with their view of China as the greatest threat to the future of the country, with a majority (84 per cent) worried that the South China Sea disputes could lead to a military conflict.²⁸

²⁷ Pew Research Center, "40 Years after Fall of Saigon, Vietnamese See U.S. as Key Ally", 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/30/vietnamese-see-u-s-as-key-ally/>.

²⁸ Ibid.

The Vietnamese public continued to maintain positive perception of the United States even after Donald Trump won the US presidential election in 2016. According to a survey done by the Pew Research Centre in 2017, while favourability ratings for the United States after Mr Trump's election plummeted in most surveyed countries, Vietnam was one of only six countries where the perception of the United States improved, increasing from 78 per cent in 2015 to 84 per cent in 2017. As much as 72 per cent of the Vietnamese surveyed considers Trump a strong leader while 71 per cent believes he is well qualified to be US president.²⁹

The positive Vietnamese perception of the United States is also remarkable in that the two countries used to be bitter enemies in a prolonged and bloody war that claimed millions of Vietnamese lives. Two key factors may explain such an attitude: First, for many Vietnamese, the United States is a prosperous, democratic and modern country with a developed economy and an advanced education system. Studying, working and living in the United States remains a dream for many Vietnamese. The increased exposure of the Vietnamese to the United States through the Internet and Hollywood movies, tourist and business exchanges, and especially through about 2 million Vietnamese living in America, also plays a role in generating such a positive perception among the Vietnamese.

Second, from the Vietnamese public's perspective, the United States does not pose any direct threat to the country. Unlike China, the United States does not have any territorial or maritime ambitions in the region which may threaten Vietnam's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Moreover, as the two countries have become increasingly important economic and security partners of each other, the risk that the United States will interfere in Vietnam or threaten the regime security of the

²⁹ These rates are remarkable given their respective global medians of 55 per cent and 26 per cent. See Pew Research Center, "U.S. Image Suffers as Publics Around World Question Trump's Leadership", 2017, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/06/26/u-s-image-suffers-as-publics-around-world-question-trumps-leadership/>.

CPV is low. In other words, while China is now perceived by Vietnam as a major threat to its national security and territorial integrity, the United States is considered by some segments in the CPV as a *potential* threat to the Party's regime security only. However, the strengthened overall relations between the two countries, and especially the US commitment to respect Vietnam's political system that has been repeated in various joint statements issued by the two countries since 2013, have significantly eased such concerns and created more room for the further consolidation of bilateral ties.

Meanwhile, strengthened relations with the United States have benefited Vietnam in many ways. For example, exports to the United States and US investment contribute significantly to Vietnam's economic performance. At the same time, Washington's increasingly hardened stance on China and its excessive claims in the South China Sea also resonates with the rising anti-China sentiments among Vietnamese. On many occasions, the United States has expressed strong support for Vietnam when the latter faced bullying behaviours from China. For example, during the 2014 *Haiyang Shiyou* oil rig incident, the US Senate passed resolution S.RES.412 that, among other things, called on Beijing to withdraw the rig from Vietnam's waters.³⁰ The US Department of State also issued a statement to condemn China's "unilateral" and "provocative" action, which "appears to be part of a broader pattern of Chinese behaviour to advance its claims over disputed territory in a manner that undermines peace and stability in the region".³¹ In a more recent stand-off between China and Vietnam in the latter's exclusive

³⁰ The text of the resolution reads: [The Senate] "calls on the Government of the People's Republic of China to withdraw its Hai Yang Shi You 981 (HD-981) drilling rig and associated maritime forces from their current positions, to refrain from maritime maneuvers contrary to COLREGS, and to return immediately to the status quo as it existed before May 1, 2014". Full text of the Resolution is available at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/senate-resolution/412/text>.

³¹ Full text of the statement is available at <https://vn.usembassy.gov/vietnamchina-chinese-oil-rig-operations-near-the-paracel-islands/>.

economic zone and continental shelf near Vanguard Bank from 2 July to 24 October 2019, the US State Department also issued a statement on 22 August 2019 to condemn China's action and indirectly express support for Vietnam's position.³² Such supportive stance of Washington together with its maritime capacity building programme for Vietnam as well as its freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea tend to generate the perception that the United States is a friend, if not a de facto ally, of Vietnam, especially where the South China Sea disputes are concerned.

In sum, Washington's soft and hard power have both played an important role in shaping a positive perception among the Vietnamese regarding the United States and bilateral relations. This, in turn, has also informed Vietnam's rather supportive view of the US-led regional and global order.

VIETNAM'S SUPPORT FOR THE RULES-BASED INTERNATIONAL ORDER

Although Vietnamese policymakers have not clearly stated their preferred international order, at its 11th national congress in 2011, the CPV made the assessment that “a multipolar world order is increasingly visible” [*cục diện thế giới đa cực ngày càng rõ hơn*]. Based on this assessment, the Party asserted that “the democratization trend of international relations will continue but the major powers will dominate international relations”.³³ The Party has accordingly tried to adapt its foreign policy to such a multipolar international order. This is in line with the country's foreign policy of “diversification and multilateralization”, under which

³² Full text of the statement is available at <https://www.state.gov/china-escalates-coercion-against-vietnams-longstanding-oil-and-gas-activity-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

³³ Communist Party of Vietnam, “Báo Cáo Chính Trị Của Ban Chấp Hành Trung Ương Đảng Khoá X Tại Đại Hội Đại Biểu Toàn Quốc Lần Thứ XI Của Đảng”, 2015, <http://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/ban-chap-hanh-trung-uong-dang/dai-hoi-dang/lan-thu-xi/bao-cao-chinh-tri-cua-ban-chap-hanh-trung-uong-dang-khoa-x-tai-dai-hoi-dai-bieu-toan-quooc-lan-thu-xi-cua-dang-1526>.

it has sought to strengthen relations with all countries in the world, especially the major powers.

Nevertheless, from Hanoi's perspective, even in a multipolar world, the United States and China are the two superpowers that matter most to its national interests. Given the intensified geo-strategic rivalry between China and the United States as well as its complex relationships with both of them, and with other powers such as Japan, India, the EU and Russia, Hanoi would find neither a bipolar order in which the "G-2" defines the terms of international relations nor a unipolar order dictated by one single global hegemon to be in its interest. Instead, Hanoi would like to see the two superpowers co-exist both cooperatively and competitively in an open and ruled-based multipolar order where other powers, big and small, can maintain their sovereignty and autonomy.

Given China's rise in recent decades, it seems Hanoi's geo-strategic interests are increasingly aligning with Washington's. Specifically, Vietnam tends to support the status quo, i.e., an open, rules-based international order. As such, Vietnam appears to have a positive perception of the role that the United States and its regional allies have been playing in maintaining the regional balance of power, order and security since the end of the Cold War. It also supports the security role of regional organizations, especially ASEAN, of which Vietnam is a member. This position is particularly compatible with Vietnam's national interests in the South China Sea where China has continuously tried to undermine the status quo and the rules-based international order by acting coercively vis-à-vis other claimant states and ignoring international law.

In the joint statement issued during President Donald Trump's visit to Vietnam in November 2017, for example, the two sides "welcomed initiatives to preserve peace and stability and to advance cooperation and development in the Indo-Pacific region", recognized the central role of ASEAN in the region, and "pledged to respect and support the centrality and unity of ASEAN in the evolving regional architecture".³⁴ The strong support for ASEAN and ASEAN-US relations reflects the two countries'

³⁴ The White House, "Joint Statement between the United States of America and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam".

shared interest in maintaining the existing regional order structured around ASEAN.

It should also be noted that although Vietnam has not yet offered an official response to the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) strategy, which is seen as the key Asia policy of the Trump administration, Vietnam should be expected to endorse it, albeit not necessarily publicly. The vision, which was first officially announced by President Trump at the APEC Summit in Vietnam in November 2017, reaffirms US commitment to “a safe, secure, prosperous, and free region that benefits all nations”. The vision flows from common principles that underpin the current international order, and which the United States believes all regional countries have a shared responsibility to uphold. They are:

1. Respect for sovereignty and independence of all nations;
2. Peaceful resolution of disputes;
3. Free, fair, and reciprocal trade based on open investment, transparent agreements, and connectivity; and,
4. Adherence to international rules and norms, including those of freedom of navigation and overflight.³⁵

The strategy, as well as its principles as defined by the Department of Defence, is largely compatible with Vietnam’s national interests.³⁶ *First*, as a medium state that has gone through multiple wars to defend its sovereignty and independence, Vietnam values the principle of respect for sovereignty and the independence of all nations that the strategy emphasizes. *Second*, due to the ongoing South China Sea disputes and Vietnam’s vulnerability to China’s growing power and increasing assertiveness, Hanoi will benefit from the principle of peaceful resolution of disputes and a regional rules-based order free from coercion, as well as the freedom of navigation and overflight highlighted by the strategy.

³⁵ Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, pp. 3–4.

³⁶ For an official explanation of the policy, see US Department of State, “Briefing on The Indo-Pacific Strategy”, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/t/pa/prs/ps/2018/04/280134.htm>.

Third, given its heavy reliance on foreign trade and investment, as well as its huge infrastructure investment needs, other economic attributes of the strategy, such as free, fair and reciprocal trade, open investment, transparent agreements and connectivity, also sit well with Vietnam’s overall foreign policy.

During the late President Tran Dai Quang’s visit to India in March 2018, the two countries issued a joint statement referring to some of the American FOIP strategy’s key elements. Specifically, they “reiterated the importance of achieving a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region where sovereignty and international law, freedom of navigation and overflight, sustainable development and a free, fair and open trade and investment system are respected.”³⁷ Before that, in his speech on bilateral relations at the Nehru Museum Library on 4 March 2018, Mr Quang adopted the term “Indo-Asia-Pacific” to describe the “space of security and development comprising the Indian Ocean, Asia and the Pacific” and suggested that in order for the twenty-first century to become the “Indo-Asia-Pacific Century”, regional countries must:

- share a common vision for an open and rules-based region, and a common interest in the maintenance of peace, stability, and inclusive prosperity;
- protect the freedom of navigation and unimpeded trade and not let the Indo-Asia-Pacific be balkanized into spheres of influence;
- build a common space for co-existence and development in the belief that the Indo-Asia-Pacific is vast enough for every country to flourish and prosper; and
- establish effective mechanisms to maintain peace, stability, and the rule of law, so as to ensure common security, prevent conflict and war, and effectively address security challenges.³⁸

³⁷ Indian Ministry of External Affairs, “India-Vietnam Joint Statement during State Visit of President of Vietnam to India”, 2018, <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29535/>.

³⁸ *The Economic Times*, “Full Speech of Vietnam President Tran Dai Quang at Nehru Museum Library”, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/63212961.cms>.

President Quang also praised India’s peaceful development as “an important and constructive factor to regional peace and stability”, and claimed that “with her vast potential and great contributions, India surely deserves a greater role in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region and the world”.³⁹

These important points of the speech prepared by officials of the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs reflect the key tenets of the American FOIP strategy. It can therefore be argued that Vietnamese diplomats are receptive to the strategy.⁴⁰ By extension, as the strategy is essentially “a reaffirmation of the security and economic rules-based order which has existed since after the Second World War”,⁴¹ Vietnam can be seen as supportive of the existing international order and of a security role for the United States in the Indo-Pacific region.

At the regional level, Vietnam has also indirectly lent support to the US Indo-Pacific vision by endorsing the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) adopted at the 34th ASEAN Summit on 23 June 2019.⁴² Specifically, the document, in repeating ASEAN’s long-standing principles regarding the regional architecture, has also echoed the key attributes of the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, namely “open”, “transparent”, “inclusive”, “rules-based”, “freedom”, and “respect for international law”. Although ASEAN did not elaborate on what “freedom” means, it should be interpreted as part of ASEAN’s collective norm of respecting sovereignty, non-intervention and equality.⁴³ As such,

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ For a more detailed analysis of Vietnam’s responses to the American FOIP strategy, see Le Hong Hiep, “America’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Vietnamese Perspective”, *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2018/43, 7 August 2018.

⁴¹ John Lee, *The “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” and Implications for ASEAN*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 13/18 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018).

⁴² Full text of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific is available at <https://asean.org/asean-outlook-indo-pacific/>.

⁴³ Hoang Thi Ha, “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific: Old Wine in New Bottle?”, *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2019/51, 25 June 2019, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_51.pdf.

the AOIP seems to share some common understanding with the US' FOIP regarding the notion of "freedom" in the international context, i.e., freedom from coercion and freedom to exercise sovereignty.

Nevertheless, Vietnam's support for Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy and the US-led rules-based international order should not be taken for granted. Within Vietnam, the current debate among strategic policymakers is not about whether the US-led rules-based international order or a China-led alternative is better for Vietnam, but about how to position Vietnam within the context of rising US-China strategic rivalry and competition. From Hanoi's perspective, the US-led rules-based international order is obviously more favourable for Vietnam, not only because China itself is a security threat to Vietnam, but also because the principles upheld by the US-led rules-based international order are mostly compatible with Vietnam's national interests. However, Vietnamese officials find it challenging to openly express Vietnam's support for such an international order as well as the US specific policies underpinning it.

On the one hand, as noted above, Vietnam does not want to be seen by China to be moving too close to the United States, especially in the context of increasing strategic rivalry between the two great powers. This may also explain why Vietnam has so far publicly refrained from endorsing or using the terms "Indo-Pacific" or "Indo-Pacific Strategy" (instead it still uses the traditional term Asia-Pacific) so as not to be seen as taking sides. On the other hand, Vietnamese officials are to some extent confused by the uncertainties generated by the Trump administration's foreign policy. Seeing that the Trump administration has taken issue with most allies and partners, Vietnamese officials are struggling to interpret Washington's real strategic intention vis-à-vis Vietnam, and how Vietnam should respond. In the defence and strategic domain, US position on the South China Sea as well as its maritime capacity-building assistance for Vietnam has been warmly welcomed by Hanoi, but Vietnam remains concerned about US long-term strategic engagement with the region in general and Vietnam in particular, given certain indication of the US disengagement from the region, such as the withdrawal from the TPP, or the decision to assign a low-ranking official to head the US delegation at the East Asia Summit

(EAS) in 2019.⁴⁴ Moreover, while Vietnam has generally benefited from the US-China trade war through the diversion of trade and investment away from China, Vietnamese officials have also been rattled by sporadic comments by Trump as well as certain moves by his administration. For example, Trump has labelled Vietnam as “almost the single worst abuser of everybody”, while the US Treasury Department added Vietnam to a currency and economic policy watch list due to Vietnam’s trade surplus with America.⁴⁵ While such uncertainties encourage Vietnamese officials to work closely with US counterparts to learn about their intentions and to address their concerns, they also discourage Vietnam from openly embracing the United States for fear of consequences arising from unexpected changes in US policy and commitments towards the region in general and Vietnam in particular.

With such considerations, Vietnam aims to strengthen strategic ties with the United States at a measured pace at which it feels comfortable. At the same time, Hanoi also tries to minimize risks associated with an open embrace of Washington as well as the US-led international order by not “taking side” with the United States, but by “taking positions”⁴⁶ in ways that are compatible with US views on specific issues critical to Washington’s interests and the rules-based international order. For example, on multiple occasions, Vietnam has declared its support for the principles upheld by the US Indo-Pacific vision, including the respect for sovereignty and independence of all nations, the peaceful resolution of

⁴⁴ At the 2019 East Asia Summit, the head of the US delegation was the newly appointed National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien, who was not a cabinet member of the Trump administration. That was the first time since the United States joined the EAS in 2011 that the US delegation had not been led by top officials at the presidential or ministerial level.

⁴⁵ Michelle Jamrisko, “Vietnam Is a Trade War Winner. Now It Has to Figure Out How to Stay Ahead”, *Bloomberg*, 29 October 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2019-new-economy-drivers-and-disrupters/vietnam.html>.

⁴⁶ Comments by a senior official from the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam made at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 5 August 2019.

disputes, and the adherence to international rules and norms, especially those of freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea. Another example is Hanoi's decision not to use Huawei equipment for its 5G networks.⁴⁷ Although Vietnam has many reasons to avoid using Huawei equipment, given the Trump administration's repeated warnings to its allies and partners about security risks associated with Huawei, it can be seen as an indication of Hanoi's willingness to align its position with Washington if such a move both serves its national interests and contributes to the strengthening of bilateral ties. These examples show that by taking positions rather than taking side, Vietnam can quietly support the United States on certain issues as well as the rules-based international order while avoiding being seen as taking side with Washington and being frowned upon by Beijing for that. As the Sino-US strategic competition is set to intensify in the foreseeable future, Vietnam will likely maintain this approach in managing its relations with the two great powers.

CONCLUSION

The thriving relationship between Vietnam and the United States despite their recent hostile Cold War history is yet another telling example of the long-standing wisdom that there are no eternal allies nor perpetual enemies, and that only interests are permanent. Putting aside the past hostilities and current ideological differences, the two countries have continuously strengthened their bilateral ties since normalization of ties in 1995. The relationship has moved beyond the domain of economic cooperation, which remains a key pillar in bilateral ties, to increasingly focus on security and strategic cooperation. Various initiatives have been taken to advance defence ties, especially since 2011, and the upgrade of

⁴⁷ For an analysis of Vietnam's decision not to use Huawei's 5G technologies, see Le Hong Hiep, "Vietnam races to launch 5G network, but Chinese tech giant Huawei notably left out of plan", *South China Morning Post*, 3 May 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3008714/vietnam-races-launch-5g-network-chinese-tech-giant-huawei-notably>.

bilateral relations from the level of “comprehensive partnership” to that of “strategic partnership” is likely to materialize in the near future.

The maturing Vietnam-US security partnership is driven by both sides’ convergent strategic interests, especially in the South China Sea, where Vietnam looks for US support to counter China’s maritime coercion and expansionism, while the United States seeks to recruit Vietnam into its ranks to deal with the China challenge and to sustain the US-led rules-based international order. The common perception of the China threat has therefore provided a strong momentum for the two countries’ strategic rapprochement and underlines the healthy progress of bilateral ties despite the strategic uncertainties generated by the Trump administration. The two countries’ shared visions about the regional and global orders result from their convergent strategic interests, and such common visions, in turn, facilitate the further consolidation of US-Vietnam strategic linkages well beyond the Trump presidency.

Nevertheless, the future upward trajectory of bilateral ties should not be taken for granted. There remain challenges that the two sides need to overcome. The further improvement of mutual trust and the building-up of Vietnam’s capacity to participate in more substantive defence cooperation initiatives with the United States should be priorities in the short to medium run. In the long term, Vietnam’s struggle to balance its strengthening ties with Washington with the troubling but important relationship with Beijing remains a challenge for Hanoi’s strategic thinkers and policymakers. As such, Vietnam’s support for the US-led rules-based international order is expected to continue, but its manifestations will vary depending on shifting dynamics in Vietnam’s relations with China as well as Sino-US strategic competition.

ISEAS
PUBLISHING

30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614
<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

ISSN 0219-3213

TRS1/20s

ISBN 978-981-4881-54-8

