

PERSPECTIVE

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Vietnam Edging Towards America

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Vietnam is caught geopolitically between the United States, the dominant power, and China, the emergent power.
- Some observers argue that Vietnam can continue to maintain a balanced position between China and the United States, while others are concerned that Vietnam may become a victim of the rising tensions between the two great powers.
- Vietnam can edge closer to the United States by adopting a US-Vietnam “soft alignment” framework where America provides more support for Vietnam’s defence and security needs.
- The United States can win hearts and minds in Vietnam by accommodating Hanoi’s key concerns, i.e. no intervention in Vietnam’s domestic politics and no intention of changing Vietnam’s socialist model.
- At the same time, Vietnam, as a middle-power, can invest more in promoting peace and stability in the region.

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INTRODUCTION

In April 2020, China's sinking of a Vietnamese fishing vessel in the Paracel Islands elicited another wave of hostility toward perceived Chinese regional hegemony.¹ Vietnam quickly lodged an official protest with China for its provocative behaviour in the disputed waters. On 18 April, China announced that it had established two administrative districts to separately manage the disputed Paracel and Spratly Islands.² Amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, China's aggressive posture triggered a strong response from Vietnam accusing China of violating its sovereignty and threatening regional stability. In the words of Vietnam's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Le Thi Thu Hang, "Vietnam demands that China respects Vietnam's sovereignty, abolish its wrongful decisions, and refrain from conducting similar actions".³

On 9 April 2020, the US Department of Defence singled out China for taking advantage of the pandemic to exert its power and maritime claims in the South China Sea, and released a statement, saying: "The United States will continue to support efforts by our allies and partners to ensure freedom of navigation and economic opportunity throughout the entire Indo-Pacific".⁴ On 23 July, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo criticised the Chinese Communist Party for being "increasingly authoritarian at home, and more aggressive in its hostility to freedom everywhere else" and called for "a new grouping of like-minded nations, a new alliance of democracies" against Beijing.⁵

In theory, Hanoi does not have to choose between Beijing, a significant trading partner, and Washington, a powerful friend. In the age of Donald Trump, however, that may not be possible, since the United States considers Vietnam a friend and China a foe. President Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy named China as America's prime threat, calling China a "strategic competitor" while identifying Vietnam as a "growing security and economic partner" and a potential "cooperative maritime partner".⁶ A shared aversion to perceived Chinese ambition in Southeast Asia has served as a stimulant in the vibrant Vietnam-US relationship.

THE DILEMMA OF VIETNAM'S STRATEGY

It would be worthwhile to recount Vietnam's view of its former adversaries – France, the United States, South Korea, Australia, and China – which have all been labelled as "foreign invaders" in Vietnamese history textbooks. Despite this unpleasant past, France is loved, Japan is respected, while the roles of South Korea and Australia have gradually been forgotten. With respect to the United States, Vietnam has advocated setting aside the past and looking towards the future, and cooperating on mutual development.⁷ Regarding the painful wartime memories, America is forgiven while China is considered a frenemy – with shared interests, but deep mutual distrust.

A key factor behind Vietnam's lingering distrust of China lies in recurring Chinese attempts at maritime pressure. A 2018 Pew Research Center study revealed that the majority of respondents in Vietnam, concerned about Chinese military power, consider China's growing military assertiveness a "bad thing".⁸ The profound unease in Vietnam is deeply rooted in a history of perceived Chinese violations of Vietnamese independence, in both the pre- and post- unification era. Earlier in its history, Vietnam was under Chinese domination for more than 1,000 years (111 B.C. to A.D. 938) and the repeated attempts to break free

during this period contributed much to “Vietnam’s fierce resistance to Chinese military interventions”.⁹

More recently, both local and diasporic Vietnamese would be hard-pressed to forget China’s 1979 month-long invasion of Vietnam, which was followed by a series of border conflicts; China’s support for the Khmer Rouge; and, its strategy of isolating Vietnam in the 1980s.¹⁰ China’s attempts to dominate Vietnam in its earlier history has continued even after Vietnam gained independence in 1945. Now, China seems to be trying to intimidate Vietnam into becoming a part of its new tributary orbit.

Amid blatant Chinese maritime coercion in the South China Sea, Vietnam has been caught in the quandary of US-China strategic competition. The dilemma arises from Vietnam’s economic reliance on China and their shared Communist ideology. While Vietnam maintains a concerned and wary posture toward China’s encroachment, Vietnam stands to benefit the most when maintaining decent relations with its Northern giant neighbour. However, in recent years, the United States has emerged as a potential security insurance for Vietnam in the South China Sea.

VIETNAM AT THE CROSSROADS

In October 2019, Vietnamese President and Communist Party chief Nguyen Phu Trong, while calling for restraint in the South China Sea, strongly emphasised that “Vietnam would by no means compromise on sovereignty and territorial integrity”.¹¹ Trong’s remarks came three months after China’s survey ship Haiyang Dizhi 8, escorted by Chinese naval assets, intruded into Vietnam’s EEZ off Vanguard Bank. To the Vietnamese government, protecting the country’s sovereignty and maintaining its independence serve as the litmus test for the political legitimacy of the Communist Party.

Reluctant to appear as siding with any major power, Vietnam has been cautious in engaging both China and the United States, despite recent Vietnam-US advancements in defence cooperation. As the ongoing shift in major power relations continue, China is well aware of Vietnam’s dilemma, and has continually tested Vietnam’s ability to stand up to its power projections in the disputed waters. Additionally, this helps China assess the strength of Vietnam-US relations.

The government of South Vietnam was previously abandoned by the United States, leading to the fall of Saigon in 1975. The controversial withdrawal of the US forces in 1973 marked an end to America’s eight-year military intervention in Vietnam. The “misalliance” between the South Vietnamese government and the United States – which led to the fall of South Vietnam – has been a controversial discourse among Vietnamese and foreign scholars.¹² This bitter experience might have prevented Vietnam from leveraging Vietnam-US relations and forming a “strategic partnership.”

But as Vietnam’s growing friction with China in the South China Sea continues to affect its national interests, Vietnam is prone to undertake a realistic analysis of the potential trajectory of US-Vietnam relations amid China’s rising clout in the disputed areas.

The United States has always been the first in recent times to strongly criticise China’s aggression in the South China Sea, support Vietnam’s maritime sovereignty, and conduct

freedom-of-navigation operations to challenge China's territorial claims. In November 2019, US Defense Secretary Mark Esper accused China of bullying its neighbours and called for a more active cooperative posture against Chinese assertiveness: "Collectively, we must stand up against coercion and intimidation, protect the rights of all nations, big and small".¹³

Vietnam's balancing and hedging strategy towards China and the United States is increasingly hard to maintain. If Vietnam appears to be conciliatory by consistently embracing Chinese investment while being compliant on maritime issues with China, Beijing may be emboldened to be more aggressive. At the same time, the United States might lose its patience since Vietnam has been perceived to display a lack of sincerity and resolve to forge stronger strategic ties with the United States.

The future of Vietnam-US relations is not solely defined by the will of the two countries, but also China's ability to refrain from challenging US-Vietnam military-to-military relations. However, it would be unwise for Hanoi and Washington to adopt a 'wait and see' attitude. If Vietnam fails to seize the opportunity to foster closer relations with the United States, China can retain the initiative to apply pressure on Vietnam's sovereignty in the South China Sea.

VIETNAM CAN CHOOSE

Vietnam-US ties have been moving along the right path since the Trump administration identified Vietnam as its emerging partner in the Indo-Pacific, and incorporated Vietnam into its strategy of bridging the Indian and Pacific Oceans. In the maritime security realm, Washington has helped Hanoi improve its defence capabilities by providing a supply of coastguard vessels to the Vietnam Coast Guard. The visits by US aircraft carriers to Vietnam, such as the USS Carl Vinson in March 2018 and the USS Theodore Roosevelt in March 2020, served as indications of a closer friendship and could "promote trust as well as cooperation between naval forces".¹⁴ This momentum in US-Vietnam relations does not merely portray the mutual benefits, but also the mutual threat faced by both countries.

In order to better protect its maritime claims at sea, Vietnam can continue to deepen its relations with other countries in the Indo-Pacific region, e.g., Japan, South Korea, Australia, and India. However, these countries, while generally opposed to China's aggressive stance in Southeast Asia, are not prone to challenge China's pursuit of hegemonic status in the South China Sea. By far, no country has been more active in voicing support for Vietnam than the United States.

Given the growing strategic competition between Beijing and Washington in the South China Sea and in other areas, Hanoi could consider opting for a form of "soft alignment" with the United States. The nature of this alignment could comprise closer US-Vietnam defence and security relations while keeping a watchful eye on China's military power. The US could strengthen its defence commitment to Vietnam by increasing the frequency of bilateral Naval Engagement Activity (NEA), first conducted in 2009, from an annual to a biannual basis.

Closer US-Vietnam defence and security ties, in the long run, would serve to deter China from conducting aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea, as China would recognise

the limits of going too far. The mutual cooperative structure could also enhance Vietnam's profile in regional and international fora as it deals with China's coercive maritime agenda.

At the same time, a "soft alignment" between Vietnam and the United States may require Vietnam to play a more prominent role as a middle power in Southeast Asia. Vietnam may work closely with middle powers in the "Quad plus"¹⁵ towards a regional maritime security mechanism that fosters multi-lateral cooperation against disruptive maritime challenges. In fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnam could leverage its ASEAN Chair status by coming up with a roadmap for ASEAN's economic recovery ahead of a post-pandemic world.

Vietnam released its National Defence New Paper in late November 2019, reiterating its "Three No's" defence policy – no military alliances, no foreign military bases on Vietnamese soil, and no taking sides with one country against another. A newly added fourth 'No', "no use of force or threats of force in international relations",¹⁶ has garnered much attention as it appeared to provide an opening for Vietnam with the wordings that "depending on the circumstances and specific conditions, [Vietnam] will consider developing necessary, appropriate defence and military relations with other countries" ('other countries' *suggested by the author to be read as other major powers minus China*).¹⁷ This coded message "represents Hanoi's clearest warning yet to China – Vietnam's near-exclusive security threat and one it perpetually attempts to both engage and balance against on multiple fronts – that Vietnam might have to strengthen defence ties with the United States if Beijing's bad behaviour persists in the South China Sea".¹⁸ This gives Vietnam room to deepen relations with the United States.

Vietnam could also resort to legal means to assert its claims in the South China Sea. Speaking at a South China Sea conference in Hanoi in December 2019, deputy foreign minister Le Hoai Trung said Vietnam still had other options for the disputed waterway: "We know that these measures include fact-finding, mediation, conciliation, negotiation, arbitration and litigation measures". Trung added, "The UN Charter and UNCLOS 1982 have sufficient mechanisms for us to apply those measures".¹⁹ Vietnam's submission of a list of conciliators and arbitrators to the United Nations in mid-May 2020 lays out a possibility of bringing China to an international court.²⁰ These recent actions show Vietnam dangling the card of pursuing the legal option in its South China Sea disputes with China. Whether it takes further action on this front will depend on the level of threat from China.

AMERICA CAN HELP

Vietnam's asymmetric relations with China in terms of the "disparities of capacities,"²¹ i.e. its military and economic imbalances with China, have complicated its determination to strengthen its partnership with the United States. Nevertheless, Washington could alter Hanoi's stance on its relations with Beijing in the South China Sea. Washington's prioritising of its strategic competition with China, while placing a high priority on improving its defence ties with Vietnam "could force Hanoi to think seriously about upgrading its relations with the United States".²²

The United States, which is keen to promote closer defence and security ties with Vietnam, can incorporate Vietnam in joint maritime training and exercises to enhance Vietnam's maritime capabilities. Following the upcoming hand-over of USCGC John Midgett (WHEC

726), a large-scale patrol vessel, to the Vietnamese Coast Guard, Vice Foreign Ministry Spokesman Doan Khac Viet stressed in May 2020 that “the two sides continue to strengthen bilateral defence relations in areas of maritime security and maritime law enforcement capacity”.²³

At the moment, the United States and Vietnam have two key dialogue mechanisms in place, i.e. the US-Vietnam Political, Security, and Defence Dialogue (since 2008) and the US-Vietnam Defence Policy Dialogue (since 2010).²⁴ However, these dialogues are not in line with the growing defence ties as they are merely headed by deputy ministers rather than the defence ministers from both sides.²⁵ It may now be time to raise these dialogue mechanisms to the ministerial level.

In addition, the United States could enhance high-level contacts on mutual security concerns by establishing an annual strategic framework dialogue. The strategic dialogue would facilitate “confidence building between defence and military officials at senior to middle-officer level”.²⁶ The broadening of such engagement would enhance the level of trust in the bilateral relationship, build closer strategic ties, and foster depth in defence and security cooperation. More military-to-military strategic dialogue would be useful and timely, given the recent development of stronger diplomatic relations.²⁷

The two countries could further consider forming a “South China Sea Rapid Response Force” (SCSRRF) to cope with potential conflicts in the South China Sea, especially since military clashes and conflicts in the area are bound to have an impact on Vietnam’s interests and sovereignty. The SCSRRF could be responsible for sharing maritime security-related information and monitoring joint operations in the South China Sea. This force could further address additional activities, such as forecasting maritime climate-related changes, managing maritime search and rescue operations, and informing regional countries about possible threats to maritime security in the disputed sea.

CONCLUSION

In February 2019, President Trump extended an invitation to President Trong to visit Washington later the same year.²⁸ Mr Trong’s state visit to the US would have signalled a more mature dimension in Vietnam’s foreign policy and a new phase of Vietnam-US cooperation. There were speculations then that Trong’s visit would have elevated Vietnam-US ties to that of a strategic partnership. In the event, Trong’s visit did not take place as planned due to health reasons and that such a visit was unlikely to take place before the all-important 13th Vietnam Communist Party Congress scheduled early next year. Vietnam may also be reluctant to officially raise the level of its ties with America to that of a strategic partnership at a time when it is busy preparing for the Congress and in the midst of escalating tensions in US-China ties.

However, at an opportune time in the future, likely after the 13th Party Congress, Vietnam and the United States can be expected to upgrade their ties to that of a strategic partnership. When this happens, it will merely be an official endorsement, somewhat belatedly, of the already growing defence and security ties between the two countries. While the momentum for cooperation in these areas has picked up in recent years, more can yet be done.

At this juncture, the key driver behind closer US-Vietnam ties is China's assertive behaviour. There are other variables to consider as well. One of which is whether the United States can be flexible and assuage Vietnam's lingering worries, namely, no intervention in Vietnam's domestic politics, and no intention of changing Vietnam's socialist model. In addition, while Vietnam seeks closer ties with the United States, Hanoi would want at the same time to retain leeway in managing its relations with China.

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³ Người Lao động, "Việt Nam phản đối mạnh mẽ việc Trung Quốc thành lập cái gọi là "thành phố Tam Sa"," 19 April 2020, <https://nld.com.vn/thoi-su/viet-nam-phan-doi-manh-me-viec-thanh-lap-cai-goi-la-thanh-pho-tam-sa-20200419191817095.htm>

⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, "China Coast Guard Sinking of a Vietnam Fishing Vessel," 9 April 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2143925/china-coast-guard-sinking-of-a-vietnam-fishing-vessel/>

⁵ "Communist China and the Free World's Future," *U.S. Department of State*, 23 July 2020, <https://www.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future/>

⁶ The White House, "The National Security Strategy (NSS)," December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

⁷ USA International Business Publications, *US Vietnam Economic and Political Cooperation Handbook*, 2009, p. 117.

⁸ Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), "How are global views on China trending?," <https://chinapower.csis.org/global-views/>

⁹ A millennium under Chinese rule is seared in the memories of the Vietnamese people, forming nuanced historical cultural layers embedded in Vietnamese society. See, Ramses Amer, "Sino—Vietnamese Relations and Southeast Asian Security," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (March 1993), p. 316.

¹⁰ When Vietnam joined the Soviet-led Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon) and signed the Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Moscow in 1978, Sino-Vietnamese relations deteriorated. China cut off military assistance to Vietnam and induced regional countries to isolate Hanoi. Chinese efforts to pressure Vietnam continued during the 1980s. Due to the gradual withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia in 1989, Vietnam's foreign relations with China, major powers and regional countries started to improve. The normalization of relations between China and Vietnam in December 1991 ended 13 years of hostility between the two Communist neighbors. See, King C. Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications*, Hoover Institution Press (September 1, 1987); V. Largo, *Vietnam: Current Issues and Historical Background*, Nova Publishers, 2002, pp. 81-88.

¹¹ Lê Hiệp, "Không nhân nhượng về độc lập chủ quyền, toàn vẹn lãnh thổ," *Thanh niên*, 16 October, 2019, <https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/khong-nhan-nhuong-ve-doc-lap-chu-quyen-toan-ven-lanh-tho-1137476.html>

¹² Nguyễn Tiên Hưng, *Khi đồng minh tháo chạy*, Hứa Chân Minh (San Jose, CA.), 2005; Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013.

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¹⁶ Ministry of National Defence, *2019 Viet Nam National Defence*, National Publishing House, 2019, pp. 23-24.

¹⁷ Ministry of National Defence, *2019 Viet Nam National Defence*, National Publishing House, 2019, p. 24.

¹⁸ Derek Grossman and Christopher Sharman, "How to Read Vietnam's Latest Defense White Paper: A Message to Great Powers," *War on the Rocks*, 31 December 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/how-to-read-vietnams-latest-defense-white-paper-a-message-to-great-powers/>

¹⁹ James Pearson, Khanh Vu, "Vietnam mulls legal action over South China Sea dispute," *Reuters*, November 6, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-southchinasea/vietnam-mulls-legal-action-over-south-china-sea-dispute-idUSKBN1XG1D6>

²⁰ See, "Viet Nam: Nomination of arbitrators and conciliators under annexes V and VII of the convention," *United Nations Treaty Collection*, 15 May 2020, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/CN/2020/CN.168.2020-Eng.pdf>

²¹ Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics Of Asymmetry*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

²² Benjamin Wilhelm, "Could China's Aggression in the South China Sea Boost U.S.-Vietnam Relations?," *World Politics Review*, 8 April 2020, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/28669/could-china-s-aggression-in-the-south-china-sea-boost-u-s-vietnam-relations>

²³ Linh Pham, "Vietnam-US defense ties maintain growth momentum, Hanoi says," *Hanoi Times*, 29 May 2020, <http://hanoitimes.vn/vietnam-us-defense-ties-maintain-momentum-hanoi-says-312271.html>

²⁴ The main purpose of these two "Defense Dialogues" is to create effective channels for information exchange, and to "discuss regional and international issues of mutual concern and measures to boost cooperation in the future". See "Vietnam, US hold 10th political, security, defence dialogue," *Public Security News*, 27 March 2019, <http://en.cand.com.vn/Politics/Vietnam-US-hold-10th-political-security-defence-dialogue-538432/> and "Việt Nam, US hold defence policy dialogue," *Viet Nam News*, 13 December 2019, <https://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/569842/vietnam-us-hold-defence-policy-dialogue.html>

²⁵ Ernest Z. Bower, "The Fifth U.S.-Vietnam Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue," *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 6 July 2012, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/fifth-us-vietnam-political-security-and-defense-dialogue>

²⁶ Carlyle A. Thayer, "The Prospects for Strategic Dialogue," in Catharin E. Dalpino (Ed.), *Dialogue on U.S.-Vietnam Relations: Ten Years after Normalization*, The Asia Foundation, 2005, p. 30.

²⁷ Vietnam is now regarded as the growing friend and partner of the United States. In 2016, the Obama administration lifted its embargo on sales of lethal weapons to Vietnam during his visit to Hanoi. The year before, Nguyen Phu Trong became the first Party Chief of the Vietnam's ruling Communist Party to visit America. In May 2017, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc was the first Southeast Asian leader to be invited to visit the White House under the Trump administration. Hanoi was subsequently chosen as the host city for the second US-North Korea summit in 2019. In a 2020 statement referring to the resumption of US-Vietnam diplomatic relations in 1995, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said: "Since then, we've built a friendship on common interests, mutual respect, and bold resolve to overcome the past and look toward the future." David Hutt, "US, Vietnam ties have never been better," *Asia Times*, 13 July 2020,

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