

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 11 May 2022

Why Vietnam Might Want to Reconsider its Russia Policy

*Derek Grossman**



Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) shakes hands with Vietnam's President Nguyen Xuan Phuc during their meeting in Moscow on 30 November 2021. Photo: Mikhail KLIMENTYEV/SPUTNIK/AFP.

** Guest writer, Derek Grossman, is a senior defence analyst at the non-profit, nonpartisan RAND Corporation, and an adjunct professor at the University of Southern California. He formerly served as the daily intelligence briefer to the assistant secretary of defence for Asian and Pacific security affairs at the Pentagon.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Russia’s war in Ukraine has put many countries in a tough spot, pitting them between maintaining healthy ties with Moscow and supporting Western punitive measures. One such nation is Vietnam.
- Despite their close cooperation on military affairs, Vietnam and Russia have been drifting apart for decades. The primary impetus for their cooperation during the Cold War—countering China—is no longer applicable to their partnership. Russia’s positions on the South China Sea disputes and Mekong River issues also do not align with Vietnam’s strategic interests.
- Much to the chagrin of the West, Vietnam’s “comprehensive strategic partnership” with Russia is likely to persist due to Hanoi’s reliance on Russian arms, bureaucratic momentum, the China factor, and shared ideology.
- Vietnam will try to weather the Russia storm and preserve ties with both Moscow and Washington, as well as other Western nations.
- For now, the best that the West can do is consistently note their concerns and the likely implications that refusing to condemn or punish Russia might have on Vietnam’s own security. No amount of poking or prodding by outside powers will be successful or be appreciated in Hanoi.

INTRODUCTION

Russia's war in Ukraine has put many countries in a tough spot, pitting them between maintaining healthy ties with Moscow and supporting Western punitive measures. One such nation is Vietnam. Earlier this year, Washington spotlighted Hanoi as a "leading regional partner" in its Indo-Pacific strategy, and Vietnam has been bolstering ties with American allies and partners, including Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, as well as key European nations.¹ Vietnam also recently completed its two-year term as a non-permanent member of the United National Security Council (2020-21), reinforcing its image as a responsible player on the international stage.

However, when the West introduced resolutions at the United Nations (UN) to condemn or punish Russia, Vietnam has either abstained or rejected each motion. On 2 March, Vietnam was one of the 35 nations that abstained from a vote on the UN General Assembly's resolution to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with the Vietnamese envoy to the UN simply noting that his country is "against all attacks on civilians that were in violation of international laws on humanitarianism and human rights."² Hanoi's latest vote on 7 April 2022 to reject ousting Moscow from the UN Human Rights Council may have struck a particular nerve among Western nations, potentially jeopardizing Vietnam's bid to become the chair of the Council from 2023 to 2025.³ And on 19 April, a report surfaced quoting a Russian source that Vietnam and Russia are planning a joint military exercise.⁴

The above developments show that Vietnam is facing a mounting challenge in maintaining a strategic balance between Russia and its Western partners, especially the United States. How Hanoi handles this challenge in the coming years will have important implications for Vietnam's foreign policy outlook and the West's future strategic engagements with the country.

After providing a brief overview of the modern history of Vietnam-Russia ties, this article argues that despite some limited benefits, the partnership is rapidly becoming a Cold War relic and may increasingly harm Hanoi's overall security interests. However, much to the chagrin of the West, Vietnam's "comprehensive strategic partnership" with Russia is likely here to stay for the foreseeable future due to Hanoi's reliance on Russian arms, bureaucratic momentum, the China factor, and shared ideology.

HOW VIETNAM AND RUSSIA GOT HERE

Vietnam's partnership with Russia was borne out of hard national security interests. During the Cold War, Moscow supported Vietnamese anti-colonialists to oust France, and later assisted the Vietnamese communists' fight against the US military and its South Vietnam ally to reunify the nation. China also supported Vietnam in both efforts. However, by the 1960s, Moscow and Beijing's doctrinal differences and their competition to lead the socialist bloc led to the Sino-Soviet split. Vietnam initially adopted a neutral stance between

the two powers, but later sided with Moscow, partly due to China's support for the anti-Vietnam Khmer Rouge regime in neighbouring Cambodia. One month prior to invading Cambodia to remove the Khmer Rouge regime in December 1978, Vietnam signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union, establishing a *de facto* security alliance between the two countries. In response, China launched an invasion of its own into northern Vietnam in February 1979.

Although Hanoi received only limited military assistance from Moscow in this war effort, and by 1985 the Soviet Union and China were reconciling their differences to Vietnam's detriment, the Vietnam-Russia partnership endured. Throughout the early 1980s, Soviet economic assistance was crucial to keeping the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) in power. After the breakup of the Soviet Union in late 1991, Vietnam and Russia tried to maintain the momentum of their traditional relationship, and on 16 June 1994 signed an agreement on basic principles of the "friendly relationship" between the two countries to replace the 1978 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. In March 2001, the two sides signed a "strategic partnership agreement," and in July 2012, upgraded their relationship to a "comprehensive strategic partnership," the highest level of Vietnam's partnership with a foreign country.

Economic ties between Russia and Vietnam, however, are minimal. In 2020, for example, their two-way trade turnover was less than US\$5 billion. For comparison, Vietnam's combined trade with China and the United States during the same year reached US\$153.4 billion and US\$87.2 billion, respectively.⁵ Russia's accumulative investment in Vietnam also remains modest, at only US\$944 million across 144 projects by the end of 2020.⁶ A significant component of economic cooperation is joint energy extraction operations. For example, Vietsovet, a joint venture established in the 1980s between Russia's Zarubezhneft and PetroVietnam, had by the late 2010s produced approximately 242.7 million tonnes of crude oil and 37.3 billion cubic metres of gas from the South China Sea.⁷

The main feature of their partnership, however, has been military cooperation, primarily in the form of Russian arms sales to Vietnam. Approximately 80 per cent of Hanoi's military systems are from the Soviet Union/Russia, although the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) has been trying to diversify suppliers in recent years. Notable Russian systems procured by the VPA include dozens of Su-30MK2 maritime strike aircraft, four *Gepard*-class frigates, six *Kilo*-class submarines, and a range of different air defence missile systems, among other platforms. Russia has also provided training for VPA officers and maintenance services for Russian systems. In perhaps the most potent sign of their military cooperation, the Soviet Union/Russia maintained access to Vietnam's naval base at Cam Ranh Bay from 1979 to 2002. In 2014, the two sides signed an agreement allowing Russia to have unlimited port calls to Cam Ranh through simplified administrative procedures. The Russian air force was also reportedly using the Cam Ranh airfield for its refuelling aircraft that service Tu-95 Bear long-range nuclear-capable bombers.⁸

VIETNAM-RUSSIA PARTNERSHIP A COLD WAR RELIC

Despite their close military cooperation, Vietnam and Russia have been drifting apart for decades. Most significantly, one of the primary drivers of their cooperation during the Cold War—countering China—is no longer applicable to their partnership. This is because China-Russia relations today are perhaps at their best in history. On 4 February, President Putin visited China for the Opening Ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics, at which the two sides highlighted that their partnership has “no limits.”⁹ As Hanoi is the junior partner in its relationships with both Russia and China, it is vulnerable to the two major powers’ strategic manipulations, including in the South China Sea.

Indeed, Moscow’s current position on the South China Sea does not align with Hanoi’s preferences. When asked in an interview in September 2016 if Moscow supported the Permanent Court of Arbitration’s (PCA) landmark ruling in July 2016 that dismissed Beijing’s claims to much of the South China Sea, Putin responded that he did not. This is a blow to Hanoi’s efforts to uphold the PCA ruling to counter China’s mounting aggression in the South China Sea and seek peaceful resolution to the dispute through international law.¹⁰ Although Moscow’s neutral position on the South China Sea is generally shared by the United States, there are key differences. Notably, much to Hanoi’s delight, Washington welcomed the PCA ruling, and since July 2020, has upheld the legality and integrity of counterclaimants’ exclusive economic zones.¹¹ Washington also regularly conducts open sea patrols and freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea to challenge Beijing’s expansive maritime claims based on its notorious “nine-dash line”.

When it comes to the Mekong River, an issue of increasing strategic significance to Vietnam where Hanoi worries that the construction of hydropower dams upstream is generating calamitous environmental consequences for Vietnam’s Mekong Delta, Russia is indifferent. In a move echoing Chinese behaviour, a Russian investor in 2013 planned to invest in three Laotian hydropower dams along the Mekong’s tributaries, with at least two of them posing serious consequences downstream.¹² By contrast, the United States established the Lower Mekong Initiative in 2009 along with Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam to discuss solutions to common problems, and promote sustainability of river resources.¹³

Vietnam’s traditional ties with Russia and its reliance on Russian arms may have explained its reluctance to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. However, this position is incongruent with Hanoi’s wish to uphold international law, especially in resolving the South China Sea dispute. Hanoi should not endorse, even tacitly, the invasion of a sovereign state, particularly since Vietnam itself has been the victim of foreign aggression multiple times throughout the 20th century. Indeed, Vietnam’s 2019 Defence White Paper states that it is against “using force or threatening use of force in international relations.” This is not a mere recitation of an obvious norm of modern international relations, but a new “no” to add to the pre-existing “Three No’s” defence policy of the country, namely no foreign bases on Vietnamese territory; no military alliances; and no siding with one country against another.¹⁴

The decision not to uphold this position at the UN carries some inherent risks for Hanoi. It inadvertently signals to other states in the Indo-Pacific that they might also remain silent when great powers invade smaller countries. If China were to attack Vietnam over South China Sea disputes, for example, these nations might adopt a “neutral” posture, just like what Vietnam has done during the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Rather, Hanoi should be seeking to send the opposite message—that unprovoked, unilateral military action against any state, anywhere, is unjustified. Doing so is more likely to convince other states that Vietnam will stand up for them, and in turn, they should stand up for Vietnam to oppose unilateral aggressions.

In sum, while the benefits for Vietnam from a close Russia partnership keep diminishing, Moscow’s strengthening ties with Beijing and the collateral damage from its invasion of Ukraine are putting Vietnam into an increasingly precarious strategic position. Maintaining close ties with Moscow may become a liability that undermines Vietnam’s reputation and national interests in the long run. Going forward, Vietnam should therefore reconsider the nature and future direction of its partnership with Russia.

VIETNAM UNLIKELY TO BUDGE FOR NOW

However, Hanoi is likely to maintain the current state of its relationship with Moscow for several reasons. One is sheer bureaucratic momentum. The reality is that Vietnam and Russia have been on good terms since the early days of the Cold War, and the two sides are quite comfortable with each other. Many older CPV leaders and VPA officers were trained in Russia. The camaraderie runs deep. As such, it would require a significant rupture in their bilateral ties to convince the Vietnamese leadership that friendly Russia ties were no longer in their interests. War in Eastern Europe does not impact Vietnam directly, and unless Moscow does something in the Indo-Pacific that hurts Hanoi’s key interests, the current situation is likely to persist.

Another factor is China. Although Moscow and Beijing are strengthening bilateral ties, Vietnamese leaders probably still believe there is some residual benefit in maintaining a close relationship with Russia, as such a partnership might temper China’s worst impulses. Another benefit for Hanoi in maintaining close ties with Moscow is the latter’s continued arms sales to Vietnam which help offset Beijing’s military advantages in the South China Sea.¹⁵ Hanoi will certainly look to keep this pipeline open, even though it has diversified arms imports away from Moscow in recent years.¹⁶

Vietnam’s energy cooperation with Russia in the South China Sea also provides Hanoi with important resources that it might have to make up elsewhere if Vietnam-Russia ties were downgraded. Additionally, such cooperation activities in waters claimed by China complicate Beijing’s response—another advantage for Vietnam.

Finally, there is an unmistakable ideological component. Both Vietnam and Russia are authoritarian regimes, making them naturally comfortable with each other. This is important

for Vietnam's old guard who continue to be suspicious of the West and the perceived threat that it is fostering democratization in the country through political and economic interactions, a quiet and incremental process known as "peaceful evolution." Russia shares similar suspicions of the West. Hence, Western democracies are unlikely to ever become as close to Vietnam as authoritarian states like Russia.¹⁷

HOW SHOULD THE WEST RESPOND?

From Hanoi's perspective, while it values Russia ties, it does not wish to see its relations with Washington and other Western partners, including on the South China Sea and Mekong issues, negatively impacted by its position on Russia's war in Ukraine. As such, it's likely that Vietnam will try to weather the Russia storm and preserve ties with both Moscow and Washington, as well as other Western nations.

America and its allies can threaten consequences to move Vietnam's position, but the risks probably outweigh the costs for them. Indeed, the Biden administration strongly values Vietnam's role in its Indo-Pacific strategy, and Washington probably would not want to sacrifice this burgeoning strategic partnership for an unrelated war in another part of the world. Washington in recent weeks has shown that it is willing to look the other way on partner policies that it disapproves of in order to retain cooperation. For example, the Biden administration appears to have relented on India's rebuff against Washington's calls for Delhi to choose between Moscow and the West.¹⁸ The one potential caveat is, however, on the enforcement of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which was designed to sanction both Russian entities selling military equipment above a certain threshold *and* the recipients. Thus far, the Biden administration has been silent on whether it would seek a CAATSA waiver for Delhi's previous purchase of Russia's S-400 missile system and any future deals. Given its high dependence on Russian arms sales, Vietnam is probably in a similar predicament with regard to CAATSA if it were to make new purchases while Putin's war still rages in Ukraine.

For now, the best that the West can do is consistently note their concerns and the likely implications that refusing to condemn or punish Russia might have on Vietnam's own security, whether in the form of unprecedented China-Russia collaboration or standing up for invaded nations. At the end of the day, it is Hanoi—and Hanoi alone—that can make adjustments to its Russia policy, either because it finally realizes the negative consequences of its partnership with Moscow, or because its old guard who hold strong sentimental attachment to Russia fade away. In the meantime, no amount of poking or prodding by outside powers will be successful or appreciated in Hanoi.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, February 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>. For an earlier mention of Vietnam's importance to the Biden administration, see White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.
- ² "Vietnam's vote for Russia on UN council could damage campaign to lead it," *Radio Free Asia*, 8 April 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/russia-04082022183521.html>.
- ³ Ibid. Vietnam's position is not unique within Southeast Asia, where only Singapore, a *de facto* US ally, has signed on to Western sanctions, and only the Philippines (a US treaty ally) and Myanmar (still represented by the previous civilian government at the UN) voted in favour of expelling Russia from the Council. Although expected, Hanoi's position is nevertheless disappointing for the West because it shows that despite recent progress, engagement of Vietnam has not resulted in further alignment with the West on key initiatives.
- ⁴ It is important to note that Vietnamese state-run media thus far have not reported on this planned exercise, and my sources indicate that Hanoi probably has some hesitation with proceeding. For the original report on the proposed exercise, see "Russia Says Military Drills Planned with Vietnam," *Benar News*, 19 April 2022, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/vietnam-russia-military-drills-04192022170936.html>.
- ⁵ "Russia-Vietnam; China-Vietnam; United States-Vietnam," *Observatory of Economic Complexity*, <https://oec.world/en/home-a>
- ⁶ General Statistics Office, *Statistical Yearbook of Vietnam* (Hanoi: Statistical Publishing House, 2021), p. 281.
- ⁷ Vietsovetro, *Gioi thieu (Introduction)*, <https://www.vietsov.com.vn/Pages/GioiThieuCT.aspx>.
- ⁸ Anton Tsvetov, "Vietnam–Russia Relations: Glorious Past, Uncertain Future", in *Vietnam's Foreign Policy under Doi Moi*, edited by Le Hong Hiep and Anton Tsvetov (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), p. 153.
- ⁹ Chao Deng, Ann M. Simmons, Evan Gershkovich and William Mauldin, "Putin, Xi Aim Russia-China Partnership Against U.S.," *Wall Street Journal*, 4 February 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russias-vladimir-putin-meets-with-chinese-leader-xi-jinping-in-beijing-11643966743>.
- ¹⁰ "Answers to Journalists' Questions," Hangzhou, 5 September 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52834>. For Vietnam's position on the ruling, see "Vietnam Welcomes South China Sea Ruling, Reasserts its Own Claims," *The Straits Times*, 12 July 2016, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/vietnam-welcomes-south-china-sea-ruling-reasserts-its-own-claims>.
- ¹¹ Edward Wong and Michael Crowley, "U.S. Says Most of China's Claims in South China Sea Are Illegal," *The New York Times*, 13 July 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/13/world/asia/south-china-sea-pompeo.html>.
- ¹² "Russian Firms Steps Up Dam Deal," *Radio Free Asia*, 16 February 2013, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/hydropower-02062013151208.html>.
- ¹³ US Department of State, "Lower Mekong River," 21 February 2019, <https://www.state.gov/lower-mekong-initiative/>.
- ¹⁴ For more insights on Vietnam's 2019 Defense White Paper, see Derek Grossman and Christopher Sharman, "How to Read Vietnam's New 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/>.

¹⁵ Derek Grossman, “Can Vietnam’s Military Stand Up to China in the South China Sea?,” *Asia Policy*, January 2018, https://www.rand.org/pubs/external_publications/EP67504.html.

¹⁶ Le Hong Hiep, “Will Vietnam Be Able to Wean Itself Off of Russian Arms?,” *Fulcrum*, 4 April 2022, <https://fulcrum.sg/will-vietnam-be-able-to-wean-itself-off-russian-arms/>.

¹⁷ It is interesting to note that Hanoi’s only democratic comprehensive strategic partner is India which also maintains good ties with Russia.

¹⁸ Vikas Pandey, “How India and US Agreed to Differ on the Ukraine War,” *BBC*, 12 April 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-61042314>.

<p>ISEAS Perspective is published electronically by: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute</p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p> <p>Get Involved with ISEAS. Please click here: https://www.iseas.edu.sg/support/get-involved-with-iseas/</p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Choi Shing Kwok</p> <p>Editorial Advisor: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Editorial Committee: Terence Chong, Cassey Lee, Norshahril Saat, and Hoang Thi Ha.</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: William Choong, Lee Poh Onn, Lee Sue-Ann, and Ng Kah Meng</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p>
--	---	--