

PERSPECTIVE

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Vietnamese Perceptions in a Changing Sino-US Relationship

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Vietnam is seen by both China and the US as an important and strategic partner in Southeast Asia. In this picture, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen (L) meets with Vietnam's Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh in Hanoi on 20 July 2023. (Photo by Nhac NGUYEN / AFP).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Sino-Vietnam and US-Vietnam relations have been progressing exponentially in recent years. Both former foes of Vietnam have invested in their respective bilateral relationships with increases in trade, investments and assistance. Vietnam is seen by both countries as an important and strategic partner in the region and an ASEAN heavyweight.
- Sino-Vietnam diplomatic, trade and political relations have been progressing from strength to strength since normalisation in the 1990s, but irritations continue over cross-border issues, and disputes in the South China Sea.
- US-Vietnam bilateral relationship is underscored by a deepening of cooperation in recent years in areas such as trade, maritime security, transnational crime, climate change, clean energy transition, health and education, and in the enhancing of regional connectivity and resilience in the Mekong.
- Using data from the State of Southeast Asia Surveys from 2020 to 2023, the authors investigate Vietnamese opinion leaders' perceptions of China and the US, in view of the changing geopolitical relationship.
- The data demonstrates that while Vietnamese opinion-leaders' views of China have oscillated over the past four years, trust in the US remains consistent.

INTRODUCTION

Vietnam's relationship with the two major powers – China and the US – is complex. To be sure, it is the only country in Southeast Asia which has fought the two most recent wars in modern history—with the US ending in 1975 and then with China in 1979. Vietnamese foreign policy promotes diversification and multilateralisation of international relations, based on the principles of “independence, self-reliance, peace, cooperation, and development”.¹ Informed by its history, this strategy enables Vietnam to maintain neutrality in its flourishing partnership with both China and the US.

SINO-VIETNAM RELATIONS

Vietnam has had a long, fractious relationship with China, suffering wars and incursions from its bigger neighbour throughout history. The most recent of these incursions was in February 1979 when the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) invaded northern Vietnam in response to Vietnam's military intervention of Kampuchea in 1978. At the risk of oversimplifying this complicated Cold War period, it would suffice to say that until the “Kampuchea question” was resolved, Sino-Vietnamese relations remained in limbo. Hence, it was not until 1991, when the Paris Peace Accords were concluded, and Vietnam left Cambodia, that a normalisation of Sino-Vietnamese relations could occur. Since then, diplomatic, trade and political relations between China and Vietnam have been progressing from strength to strength.

Even before normalisation, Vietnam's formal ties with China could be traced back over 70 years when the two Communist Parties established links with each other. The continuing strength of Sino-Vietnamese communist ties was demonstrated by a visit by Vietnamese Communist Party Chief Nguyen Phu Trong to Beijing immediately after the 20th Chinese Communist Party Congress in October 2022. Nguyen became the first foreign leader to visit Xi after the latter's confirmation as third-term President.² The strength of these ties can be seen even as recently as when China asked Vietnam to uphold ideological ideals in relations with each other and in resolving regional issues.³

Beyond ideological linkages, Vietnam has also progressively become an important economic and trading partner to China. Pham Minh Chinh travelled to China in June 2023 in what was the first official visit by a Vietnamese Prime Minister to Beijing in seven years.⁴ Trong's visit to China last year also reflected new heights in bilateral economic cooperation, with 13 agreements being signed on a range of cooperation areas – two of which promote partnerships in economics and trade, and in strengthening supply chains.⁵ Similarly with PM Chinh's visit, China expressed interest to promote “strategic synergy” in bilateral relations.⁶

The year 2023 marks the 15th anniversary of the China-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership – the highest hierarchy in Vietnam’s diplomatic relations. Sino-Vietnamese relations are thus important due to geographical proximity, shared ideological beliefs, and the evolving nature of relations between the US, Soviet Union and Vietnam.⁷

US-VIETNAM RELATIONS

This year also marks the 50th anniversary of the Paris Peace Accords that were signed in January 1973 which effectively put an end to the Vietnam War. Since the establishment of formal diplomatic relations in 1995, US-Vietnam relations have changed dramatically, transforming the two from former foes to comprehensive partners; the two countries celebrated the 10th anniversary of the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership in April 2023.⁸ The US hopes to upgrade this relationship to a strategic partnership, but Hanoi remains concerned about upsetting its powerful neighbour.⁹ An upgrade, as some have suggested, would in any case be framed as a normal trajectory of the growing US-Vietnam relationship rather than as an “alliance” to contain China.¹⁰ Reports suggest that an elevation in the US-Vietnam relationship may take place in the coming weeks, with President Joseph Biden making an official visit to mark the occasion.¹¹

The exponential rise in the strategic importance of the US-Vietnam bilateral relationship is underscored by a deepening of cooperation in areas such as trade, maritime security, transnational crime, climate change, clean energy transition, health and education, and in the enhancing of regional connectivity and resilience in the Mekong. Vietnam is viewed increasingly by Washington as an important member of ASEAN. Vietnam was named a “like-minded partner” in the US’ Indo-Pacific strategy¹² and a member of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity. The importance of Vietnam to the US is evidenced in the number of visits that senior members of the US administration have made despite the pandemic, including by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Vice President Kamala Harris in 2021, Foreign Secretary Antony Blinken in April 2023, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen in July 2023, and President Joseph Biden’s recently announced plans to visit Vietnam later this year. Vietnam signed a Trade and Investment Agreement with the US in 2007 and has since become the US’ 10th largest goods trading partner and the US’ 28th largest goods export market in 2020.¹³

VIETNAMESE PERCEPTIONS

Data from *The State of Southeast Asia Survey* by ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute found that Vietnamese opinion leaders’ perceptions of China have oscillated since the survey was first conducted in 2019. Yet, perceptions of the US remain strong in the same period during which the survey was taken.

Since the launch of the survey in 2019, Vietnam has consistently ranked in the top four highest number of respondents.¹⁴ It reached the highest number in 2021, when the survey was first offered in Vietnamese. Respondents hailed from different affiliations, with all years having representation across all categories of academia, think-tanks, and research institutions; the business or finance sector; civil society, NGOs, and the media; and regional or international organisations. They also encompassed all age groups from 18-21 to those above 60.

PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA

Cross-border threats such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as geopolitical and geo-economic tensions, are all significant drivers that have influenced Vietnam’s perception of China. Points of contention revolve around maritime and territorial disputes, in particular in the South China Sea where Vietnam is a major claimant. This is corroborated in the survey findings, which shows that despite variations year-on-year, Vietnam consistently ranked among the top three ASEAN countries with the highest levels of distrust (respondents who chose “no confidence” or “little confidence”) in China to “do the right thing” in the wider interests of the global community. As illustrated in Figure 1, Vietnamese levels of distrust in China also rank higher than the regional ASEAN average throughout all years of the survey period.

How confident are you that China will “do the right thing” to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance?

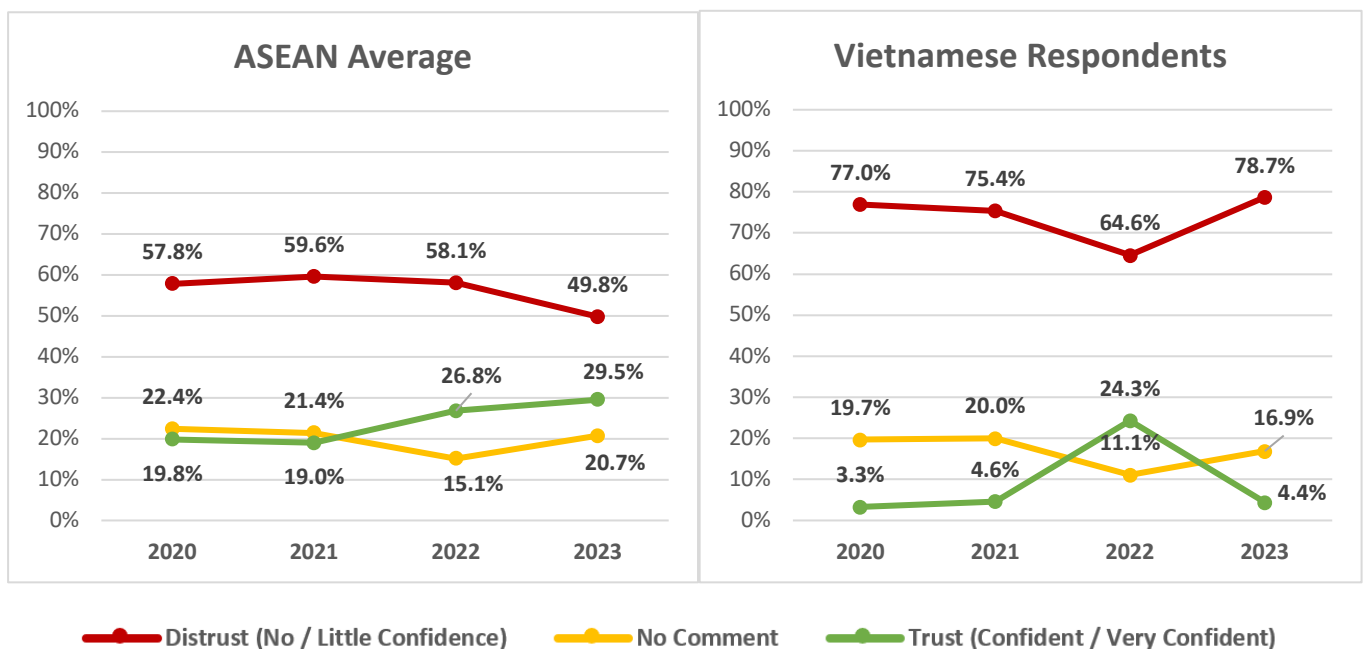


Figure 1: Vietnamese Perceptions of China Compared to the ASEAN Average

When asked about reasons for their distrust of China, a consistent majority of Vietnamese respondents (above 45% since the question was first asked in 2020, as shown in Figure 2) indicated their concern about China's economic and military power, which could be used to threaten their country's integrity and sovereignty.

China's economic importance to Vietnam is beyond doubt. It is Vietnam's largest trading partner and the first market to reach US\$100 billion trade turnover in 2018.¹⁵ In 2022, bilateral trade between the two reached US\$234.9 billion, placing Vietnam as China's sixth largest trading partner globally and the first among ASEAN countries.¹⁶ China has also consistently ranked as one of Vietnam's top investors, with registered capital amounting to US\$2.46 billion in 2020, US\$2.92 billion in 2021, and US\$2.5 billion in 2022.¹⁷ Investments range across multiple sectors, from manufacturing to human resource development to BRI infrastructure projects such as the Cat Linh–Ha Dong tramline¹⁸.

Despite these positive trends, China's implementation of its zero-Covid policy still negatively impacted Vietnam's trade flows and supply chains; Vietnam's labour-intensive economy is heavily dependent on China for raw materials and equipment, and the latter's restrictions disrupted local productivity. In addition, there is a significant trade imbalance between China and Vietnam, with trade deficits increasing and hitting a record US\$60.2 million in 2022.¹⁹

Anxiety over China's growing power has also been exacerbated in recent years due to the assertiveness over its claims in the South China Sea. Since 2013, China has engaged in land reclamation and artificial island-building, and have so far constructed 27 large artificial islands across the Paracel and Spratly Islands.²⁰ Subsequent fortification, including the deployment of vessels near these outposts, have also posed a threat to regional security and stability, drawing criticism from countries in the region and beyond.²¹ In 2020-2022, negotiations between ASEAN and China on a draft code of conduct in the South China Sea stalled, with meetings having shifted online due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Why do you distrust China?

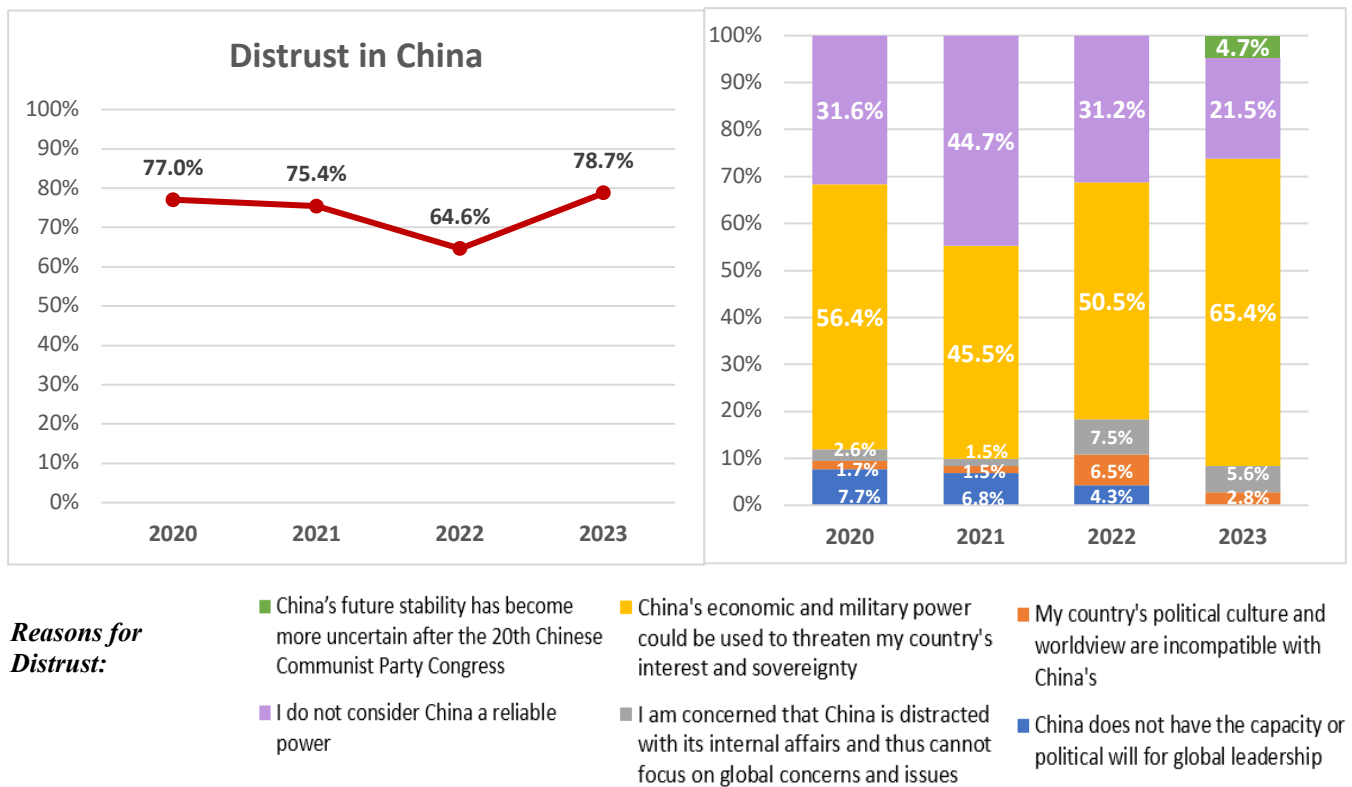
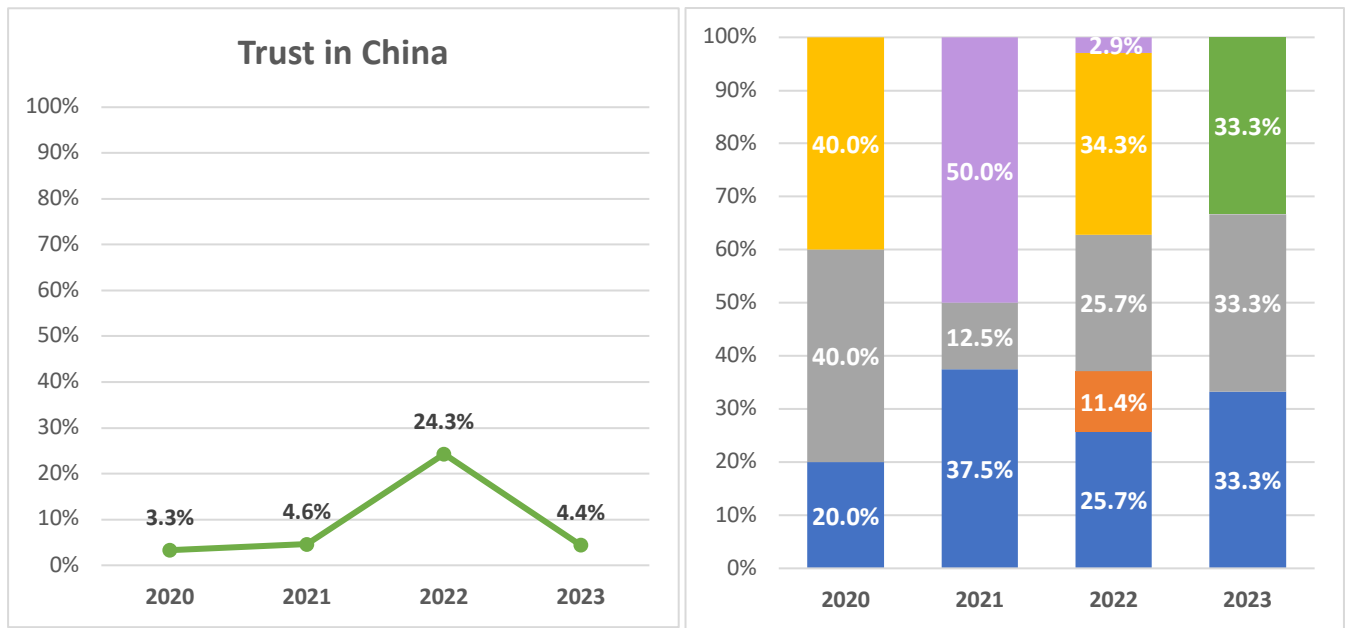


Figure 2: Percentage of Vietnamese Respondents Who Distrust China and Reasons Why²²

More recent Vietnamese perception of China offers some hope, most evidently in the 2022 survey which showed the highest levels of trust, at 24.3% (as shown in Figure 3). When asked about why they trust China, 2022 respondents cited China’s military power as an asset for global peace and security at 34.4%, its vast economic resources and strong political will to provide global leadership, and China being a responsible stakeholder that respects and champions international law – both at 25.7% (also shown in Figure 3).

Why do you trust China?



Reasons for Trust:

- The 20th Chinese Communist Party Congress has made China stronger and more stable
- China's military power is an asset for global peace and security
- My country's political culture and worldview are compatible with China's
- I respect and admire its civilisation and culture
- China is a responsible stakeholder that respects and champions international law
- China has vast economic resources and strong political will to provide global leadership

Figure 3: Percentage of Vietnamese Respondents Who Trust China and Reasons Why²³

Although levels of trust the following year dropped back down to 4.4%, it would appear that the 20th Chinese Communist Party Congress provided China with a more positive image for those who expressed confidence in Chinese leadership (33.3%), as seen in the 2023 survey results in Figure 3, a much higher proportion than the regional ASEAN average of 8.3% who say the 20th Congress made China stronger and stable.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE US

When asked the same question about the US, survey results showed a stark contrast, with Vietnam consistently ranking among the top two countries with the lowest levels of distrust of the US – except for 2023 when it ranked fourth – throughout the four years of the survey. Figure 4 shows that Vietnamese levels of distrust towards the US are also well below the ASEAN average.

How confident are you that the US will “do the right thing” to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance?

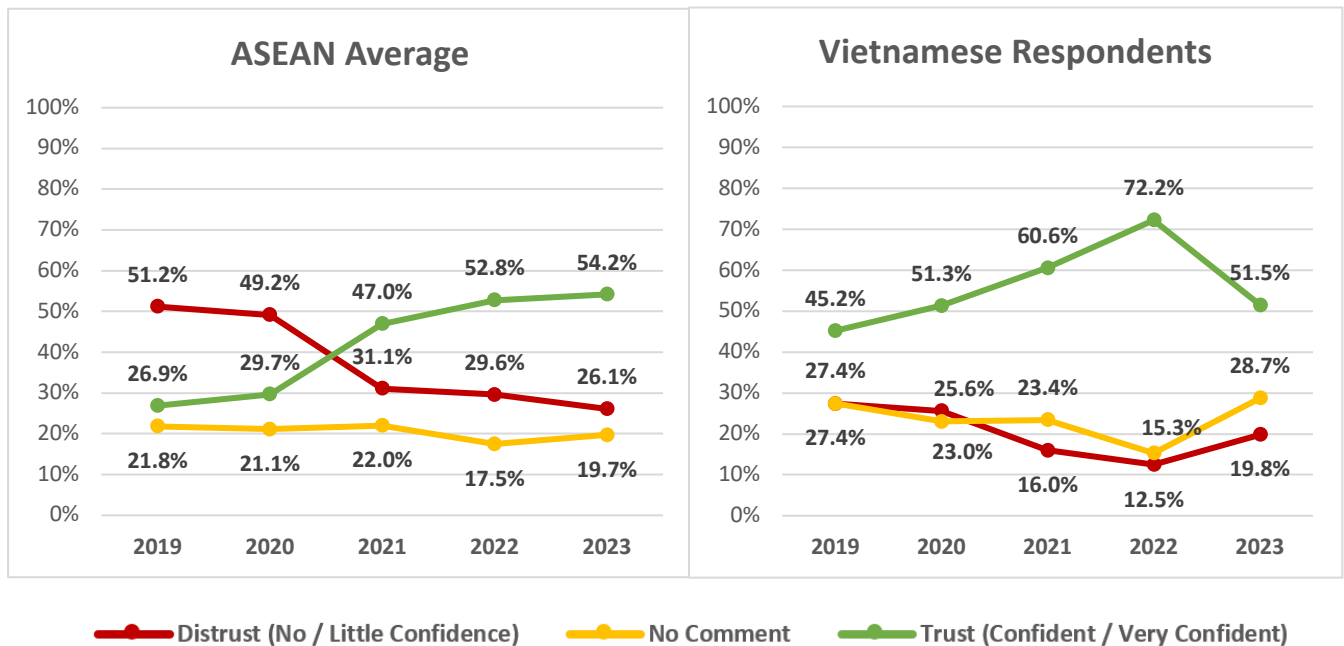


Figure 4: Vietnamese Perceptions of the US Compared to the ASEAN Average

Vietnam is a crucial partner for the US, with its significance going beyond the context of major power rivalry in the region. This is proven by the expansion of cooperation areas between the two, along the lines of the seven pillars of: 1) addressing the legacies of war; 2) promoting shared prosperity; 3) growing security cooperation; 4) commitment to addressing climate and clean energy; 5) strengthening health cooperation; 6) supporting a resilient Mekong Region; and 7) investing in the next generation.²⁴

Vietnamese perceptions of the US have been positive through the recent years, with a majority of respondents from 2020 to 2023²⁵ saying they are either confident or very confident in the US “to do the right thing”, as seen in Figure 5. When asked about reasons why Vietnamese respondents trust the US, the consistent majority (always above 55%) cited its vast economic resources and political will to provide global leadership. The percentage of those who view the US’ military power as an asset for peace and security has also more than doubled from 12.8% in 2020 to 28.6% in 2023. In the past few years, the US and Vietnam’s security partnership has continued to expand, with both sides being committed to a free and open Indo-Pacific region. From 2017 to 2022, the US has given Vietnam around US\$92 million in security assistance under the Foreign Military Financing Programme, to promote Vietnam’s maritime security.²⁶

In terms of economic cooperation, there has been a notable rise in bilateral trade to reach US\$139 billion last year or 300 times greater than when diplomatic relations were normalised

in 1995.²⁷ US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen’s visit to Hanoi in July 2023 further emphasised Vietnam as a critical player in the global semiconductor supply chain, with her vowing US support for economic and trade resilience in the post-pandemic world.²⁸ Yellen also called Vietnam a “key partner in advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific”, thus giving strategic weight to Hanoi. In turn, Vietnam sees the US in the same frame as providing a balance of power in the region that is increasingly dealing with an assertive, and at times aggressive, China. For this reason, despite concerns about how China would view an upgrade in the US-Vietnam relationship, the prevailing narrative of “escaping China’s orbit”²⁹ may bolster support for an upgrade especially on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership this year.

Why do you trust the US?

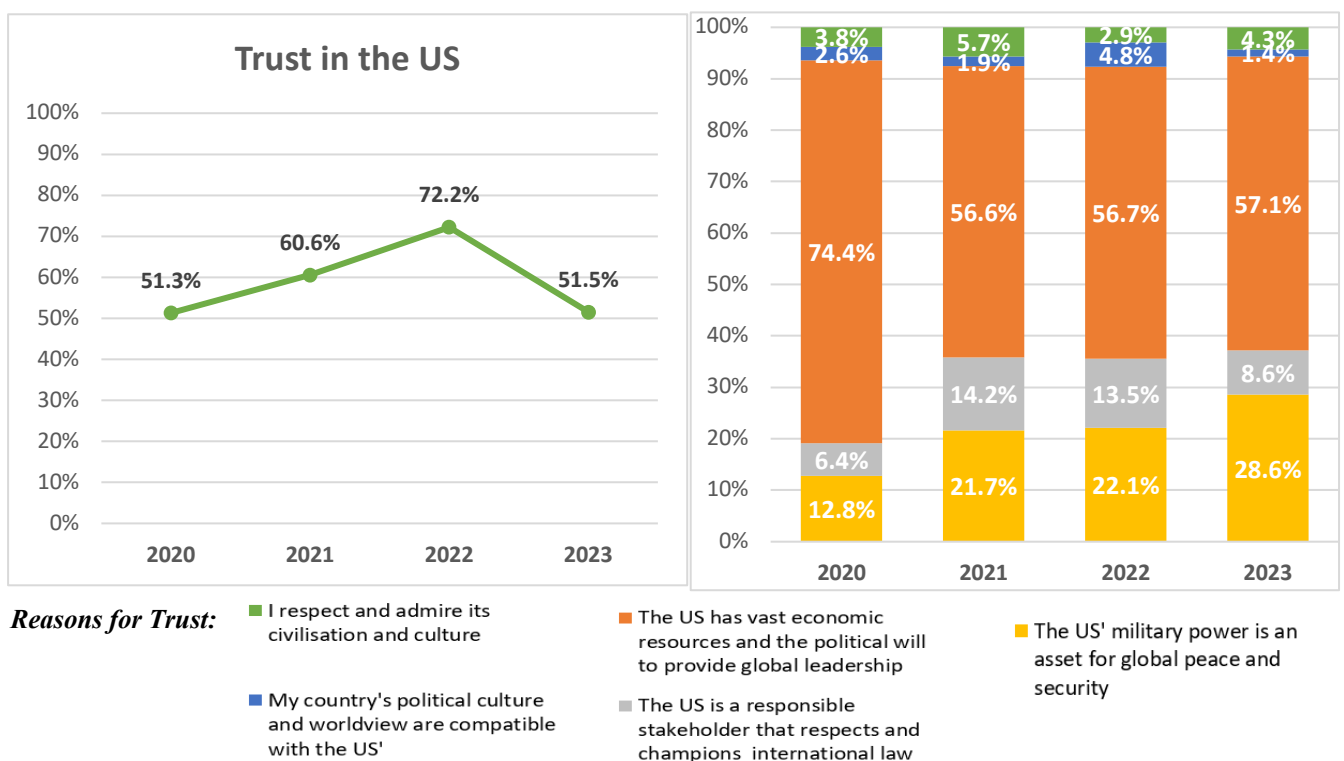


Figure 5: Why Vietnamese Respondents Trust the US

Conversely, Figure 6 shows that for the smaller group of respondents who express their distrust in the US,³⁰ there are two main reasons: firstly, the US’ lack of capacity and political will to exercise global leadership, with these percentages growing from 17.9% in 2020 to 29.6% in 2023, and secondly, the US’ economic and military power having the potential to threaten Vietnam’s national interest and sovereignty, with the percentages growing from 10.3% in 2020 to 33.3% in 2023. The concern that the US is distracted with its internal affairs, highest in 2020 (56.4%) at the end of the Trump Administration, dropped to 25.9% in 2023 in the third year of the Biden Administration.

Why do you distrust the US?

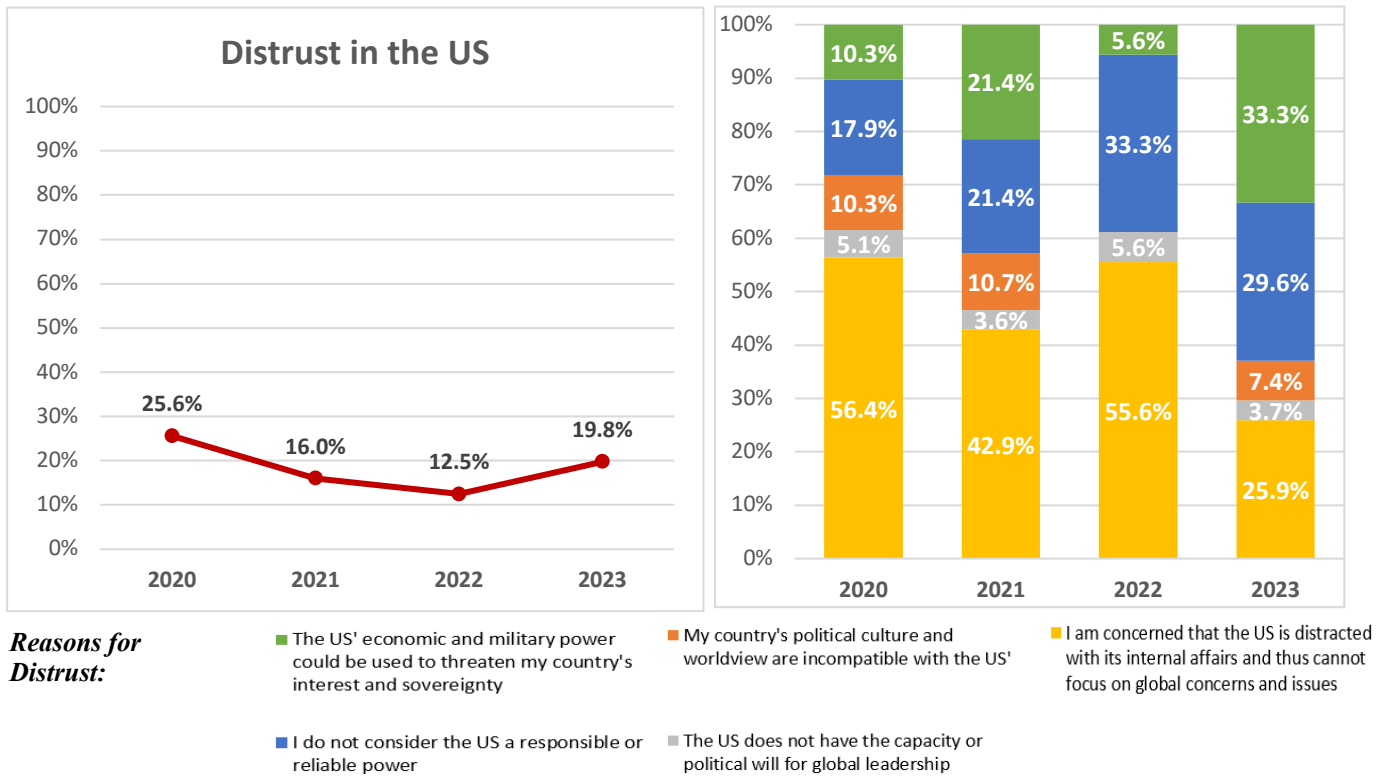


Figure 6: Why Vietnamese Respondents Distrust the US

IF FORCED TO CHOOSE, CHINA OR THE US?

If ASEAN were forced to align itself with one of the two strategic rivals (China or US), which should it choose?

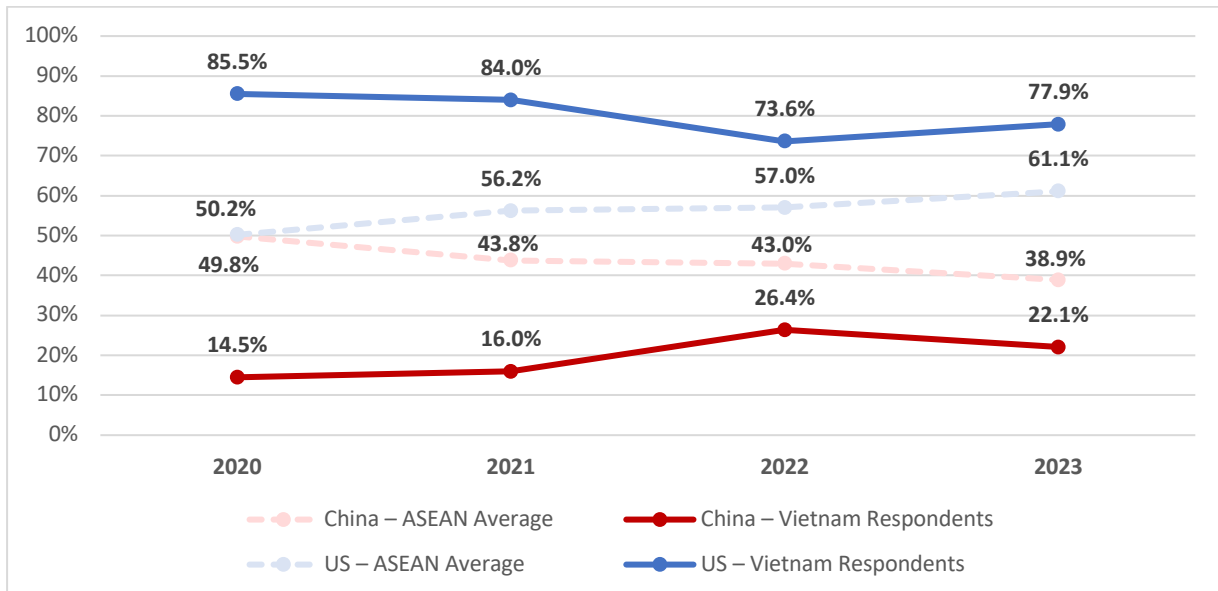


Figure 7: Comparison of ASEAN Average and Vietnamese Respondents’ Alignment Choice

If forced to align with either China or the US, an overwhelming majority of Vietnamese respondents consistently chose the latter with percentages far outstripping the regional ASEAN averages through the past four years. Notwithstanding the slight improvements in China’s trust perception among Vietnamese respondents, the impact on foreign policy has yet to manifest. Vietnamese perceptions towards China and the US will likely continue to oscillate within the ranges in the coming years as the geopolitical environment evolves. It is not in Vietnam’s national interest to be seen choosing between one or the other major powers but rather to work with both to advance its foreign policy objectives.³¹

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