



Regional Responses to U.S.-China Competition in the Indo-Pacific

Vietnam

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Preface

As part of the project Regional Responses to U.S.-China Competition, this country-level report explores Vietnam’s perspective on rising U.S.-China competition and potential implications. This research provides findings and recommendations for the sponsor, Pacific Air Forces (PACAF), as well as other military and civilian decisionmakers focused on the future of the Indo-Pacific region. The report should also be of interest to the national security community and members of the general public, especially those with an interest in U.S.-China competition in the Indo-Pacific. The other reports in this series are available at www.rand.org/US-PRC-influence.

The research reported here was sponsored by Brig Gen Michael P. Winkler (PACAF/A5/8) and conducted within the Strategy and Doctrine Program of RAND Project AIR FORCE as part of a fiscal year 2019 project titled “Regional Responses to U.S.-China Competition in the Indo-Pacific” that assists the Air Force in evaluating U.S. and Chinese influence and assessing possible Air Force, joint force, and U.S. government options. Research was completed in September 2019.

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Summary

Issue

This report focuses on two questions: What is the current state of U.S. versus Chinese influence in Vietnam? And to what extent can the United States increase its influence relative to China's in Vietnam? To answer these questions, the report leverages a framework developed by the RAND Corporation to examine the pressure points—diplomatic and political, economic, and security and military—that both Beijing and Washington have on Hanoi. The report then evaluates how Hanoi is responding to these influence variables—especially as U.S.-China competition grows fiercer across the region and globally.

Approach

The research draws on a range of primary and secondary sources in both English and Vietnamese, data sets, and interviews conducted in English that occurred primarily in April 2019, although some were adapted from a separate project from 2017. To understand regional responses to competition, I traveled to Vietnam and interviewed government and military officials and experts.

Findings

- According to the framework analysis, China maintains a healthy edge over the United States in influence in Vietnam. Although Washington is slightly ahead in the diplomatic and political sphere, and it clearly leads in the security and military domain, Beijing is dominant economically.
- Overall, China is an unavoidable partner for Vietnam, as it maintains the preponderance of influence in the country. Consequently, Vietnam's top priority will be to maintain positive ties with China.
- Acute bilateral challenges with China, nevertheless, seem to have already convinced Vietnamese leadership to upgrade the U.S.-Vietnam partnership. This trend is almost certain to continue as China pushes its expansive and overlapping sovereignty claims with Vietnam in the South China Sea (SCS). Indeed, overall U.S.-Vietnamese ties could dramatically ramp up, specifically in the security domain, if tensions reach a breaking point or armed conflict begins.
- But, realistically, barring a major turn of events in the SCS, it is difficult to see how Vietnam might begin favoring the United States over China.

Recommendations

Recommendations for the U.S. government at large include the following:

- Like many countries in the region, Vietnam is skeptical that the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy is sustainable over time and that it can effectively deter China from future assertiveness in the SCS. The United States should consider deepening and routinizing interactions with Vietnamese counterparts, prioritizing quality over quantity to avoid any bandwidth challenges. Doing so should go a long way toward convincing Hanoi that Washington will be a Pacific power for the foreseeable future and that it is ready to assist against Beijing.
- Beyond the SCS issue, Vietnam would like the United States to focus on the corrosive effects that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is having on its neighbors in Indochina, which directly affects Vietnam. Vietnam worries that Cambodia and Laos are increasingly becoming beholden to China, in effect eroding Hanoi's special relationship with these nations. The United States should show a commitment to competing with BRI to help Vietnam avoid encirclement by pro-China countries. Relatedly, deeper U.S. commitment to combating the negative environmental impacts of BRI in these countries, especially because of China's dam construction along the Mekong River, would be of particular interest.
- Above all, Washington should consider allowing its relationship with Hanoi to unfold organically—i.e., allow Vietnamese leaders to arrive at their own conclusions about Chinese behavior and the benefits of working with the United States. Stating or otherwise implying that Hanoi must make a choice as U.S.-China competition heats up is only likely to be counterproductive.

The joint force should consider the following recommendation:

- The joint force should continue to work with and through its allies and partners to find areas of complementarity in key objectives to avoid a duplication of effort in Vietnam. For example, Japan, India, and increasingly South Korea support Vietnam's maritime security objectives. Australia does as well and additionally supports Vietnam's peacekeeping operations (PKO), professional military education (PME), and even special forces goals. Japan is also active in the domains of search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and maritime law enforcement. Within and outside the Indo-Pacific, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom might be leveraged for their English-language training, PKO, and PME services.

Recommendations for Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) and the U.S. Air Force (USAF) include the following:

- In senior-level visits with the Vietnamese Ministry of National Defence, the USAF and PACAF should press for service-to-service cooperation to become routine to minimize the chance of future disruptions.
- The USAF and PACAF should look for opportunities to build the Vietnam Air Defence–Air Force's (VAD-AF) institutional capacity, particularly its support functions, including maintenance, sustainment, and safety activities.
- Lastly, because of VAD-AF sensitivities while on base, perhaps the USAF and PACAF could suggest that cooperative activities take place in other nonmilitary locations.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Brig Gen Michael P. Winkler and the entire team at Pacific Air Forces (A5/8) for sponsoring this research. I also benefited enormously from dozens of anonymous interviews with Vietnamese interlocutors and two trips to Vietnam, courtesy of the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV). Without DAV's support, this report would not have been possible, and I am sincerely grateful for its participation. Special thanks are also due to RAND colleague Huynh Trung Dung for his identification, translation, and contextualization of vital primary source materials in Vietnamese. This report would not have been possible without him. I also greatly appreciate the concerted peer reviews of Rich Girven, CAPT Christopher Sharman, and Andrew Scobell. Finally, I would like to thank Bonny Lin and Michael S. Chase for their management of the project, as well as Paula Thornhill and Raphael Cohen for their leadership within the Strategy and Doctrine Program of RAND Project AIR FORCE. Although many were involved in the creation of this report, any errors are my sole responsibility.

Abbreviations

ADMM	Association for Southeast Asian Nations Defence Ministers' Meeting
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ARF	Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCG	Chinese Coast Guard
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CoC	code of conduct
CPTPP	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
DAV	Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam
EAS	East Asia Summit
EEZ	exclusive economic zone
FDI	foreign direct investment
FONOP	freedom of navigation operation
FTA	free trade agreement
HA/DR	humanitarian assistance and disaster relief
LMI	Lower Mekong Initiative
MDA	maritime domain awareness
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Vietnam)
MND	Ministry of National Defence (Vietnam)
MoU	memorandum of understanding
MPS	Ministry of Public Security (Vietnam)
ODA	official development assistance
PACAF	Pacific Air Forces
PAFMM	People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (China)
PKO	peacekeeping operations
PLA	People's Liberation Army (China)
PLAAF	People's Liberation Army Air Force (China)
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy (China)
PME	professional military education
SAR	search and rescue
SCS	South China Sea
SEZ	special economic zone
TPP	Trans-Pacific Partnership
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

USAF	U.S. Air Force
VAD-AF	Vietnam Air Defence–Air Force
VCG	Vietnam Coast Guard
VCP	Vietnamese Communist Party
VPA	Vietnamese People’s Army
VPN	Vietnam People’s Navy

1. Introduction

Vietnam is arguably one of the most important partners for the United States in the Indo-Pacific region.¹ The country embodies the “free and open” values of the Donald Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy because Vietnam seeks to preserve its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence on a daily basis in the face of China’s increasingly intrusive economic and military power.² Whether being deeply concerned about the long-term geostrategic implications of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to forge “win-win” cooperation through trade and infrastructure development programs in Vietnam and its Indochina neighbors or resolutely standing up to Beijing’s excessive territorial claims and growing assertiveness of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in the South China Sea (SCS), Vietnam is a prime target of Chinese coercion (for a map of the region, see Figure 1.1). Vietnam plays the foil to China’s assertiveness by being a responsible member of the international community. Vietnam is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and chairs the regional multilateral group in 2020. Hanoi has been the most outspoken proponent of reaching a legally binding code of conduct (CoC) with China in the SCS and of supporting the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling in July 2016 against China and in favor of the Philippines.³ Vietnam also serves as a nonpermanent member of the United Nations Security Council from 2020 to 2021, further elevating its calls for all countries to abide by international law and accepted norms of behavior.⁴

Vietnam also provides an example of how systemic reform and opening up of a socialist economy to the private sector can promote a prosperous, peaceful, and internationally integrated society. In 1986, the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) enacted *Đổi Mới* (Renovation Policy) reforms that ultimately lifted millions of Vietnamese people out of extreme poverty and boosted Vietnam to global prominence as one of the top 50 strongest and largest economies.⁵ According to a recent World Bank overview of Vietnam, the past 30 years since *Đổi Mới* have been nothing short of “remarkable.” Reforms “have spurred rapid economic growth and development and

¹ *Partner* is defined here as any Indo-Pacific country other than those holding security alliance status with the United States (Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand).

² For more on the Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy, see U.S. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, Washington, D.C., June 1, 2019b.

³ Permanent Court of Arbitration, “The South China Sea Arbitration (*The Republic of the Philippines v. The People’s Republic of China*),” press release, July 12, 2016.

⁴ To be sure, Hanoi also has historical SCS claims despite its calls for international law and norms of behavior to prevail. The scale of Vietnamese claims and activities in the region, however, pales in comparison to China’s.

⁵ For a good discussion on the drivers of *Đổi Mới*, see, for example, Jonathan London, “Viet Nam and the Making of Market-Leninism,” *Pacific Review*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2009.

transformed Vietnam from one of the world’s poorest nations to a lower middle-income country.”⁶ Vietnam’s GDP, now approximately \$241 billion, has increased 30-fold in the past three decades, and its total trade stands at approximately \$527 billion.⁷ Vietnam has been called an “Asian tiger” and is now ranked 45th in GDP. Indeed, these are truly remarkable developments considering that, in 1988, the country had approximately 3 million people suffering from starvation and 5 million malnourished within its borders.⁸ Separately, and most recently, Vietnam has served as a model to the world on how to effectively mitigate the negative impacts of the coronavirus pandemic.

Figure 1.1. Map of the Indo-Pacific Region



⁶ World Bank, “The World Bank in Vietnam,” webpage, undated.

⁷ For analysis of Vietnam’s economic progress over the past 30 years, see Hong Hiep Le, “The Vietnam Model for North Korea,” *Project Syndicate*, February 26, 2019a. Vietnam’s GDP statistics are from World Bank, undated; trade statistics are from World Trade Organization, “Viet Nam and the WTO,” webpage, undated; 2018 data are from Observatory of Economic Complexity, “Vietnam,” webpage, undated.

⁸ Le Thu Huong, “Can Vietnam’s Doi Moi Reforms Be an Inspiration for North Korea?” *Asian Forum*, August 23, 2018.

Nevertheless, significant political challenges persist. The VCP, for example, is implementing a new cybersecurity law that could curb and monitor Vietnamese social media interactions, and Washington’s concerns persist over Hanoi’s heavy-handed treatment of its citizens. Many VCP elders have lingering postwar paranoia about the West’s alleged interest in exporting democracy through “peaceful evolution.”⁹

Despite these worrisome features of Vietnam’s political system, the country overall stands out as a model member of the regional and international communities whose participation in the Indo-Pacific Strategy is critical. Vietnam is also under increasing duress from China to protect its sovereignty, primarily in the SCS, and Hanoi sees the United States as a natural defense and maritime security partner in this endeavor. Indeed, as then–Secretary of Defense James Mattis said during his January 2018 visit to Vietnam, the United States and Vietnam are “like-minded partners” in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁰ As much as Vietnam is a natural friend of the United States, there are also very strict limits on bilateral cooperation, especially in the defense and security domain, because of VCP concerns that deep cooperation might unnecessarily antagonize China. Within the context of rising U.S.-China competition in recent years, Vietnam is very unlikely to choose or favor the United States, as Vietnam’s security policy has assiduously sought to balance great powers and avoid taking sides. Thus, the best scenario that Washington can reasonably hope for is a gradual strengthening of political, economic, and security exchanges that encourage Hanoi to contribute further to the Indo-Pacific Strategy.

In this vein, the report focuses on two questions: What is the current state of U.S. versus Chinese influence in Vietnam?¹¹ And to what extent can the United States increase its influence relative to China’s in Vietnam? To answer these questions, the report builds on an extensive literature on China-Vietnam-U.S. ties by employing a RAND-developed framework (see Table 1.1, with further details available in the appendix) that considers multiple pressure points—diplomatic and political, economic, and security and military—that both Beijing and Washington have on Hanoi.¹² The report then evaluates how Hanoi is responding to these influence

⁹ Peaceful evolution involves fomenting domestic unrest to destabilize the VCP regime, as was allegedly done via “color revolutions” in Russia’s post-Soviet space in the mid-2000s and the Middle East in 2011.

¹⁰ Lisa Ferdinando, “Mattis Calls U.S., Vietnam ‘Like-Minded Partners,’” U.S. Department of Defense, January 25, 2018.

¹¹ *Influence* is a term defined consistently across all of the RAND team’s partner reports for this project, and it is defined as follows: the ability of the United States (or China) to shape the partner’s decisionmaking to align with or support key U.S. (or Chinese) objectives and priorities. There are two components to influence: (1) **shared interests** between the partner and the United States (or China), including shared values and views, and (2) **relative capabilities** or resources the United States (or China) can use to incentivize or coerce (deter or compel) the partner.

¹² China-Vietnam-U.S. dynamics have been examined, for example, by Hong Hiep Le, *The Vietnam-US-China Triangle: New Dynamics and Implications*, Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Institute, August 25, 2015b; Alexander L. Vuving, “Strategy and Evolution of Vietnam’s China Policy: A Changing Mixture of Pathways,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 46, No. 6, November–December 2006; Thi Hai Yen Nguyen, *Sino-American Interactions in Southeast Asia 1991–2015: Implications for Vietnam*, doctoral thesis, Wollongong, Australia: Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts, University of Wollongong, 2015; and James Bellacqua, *The China Factor in U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, Alexandria, Va.: CNA, March 2012. For a more theoretical discussion of triangular security relationships, using the U.S.-China-

variables—especially as U.S.-China competition grows fiercer across the region and globally.¹³ The report accomplishes this by first analyzing Vietnam’s security policy and domestic politics and then transitioning to Vietnam’s political, economic, and security and ties to the United States and China. Finally, the report offers a few thoughts on the prospects of achieving enhanced U.S.-Vietnam relations to counter rising Chinese coercion in the future, with an eye toward the specific needs of the U.S. Air Force (USAF) and Pacific Air Forces (PACAF).

According to the framework analysis, although China maintains a healthy edge in the economic domain in Vietnam, the United States is probably slightly ahead in the diplomatic and political domain. And, significantly, Washington demonstrates a clear lead over Beijing in the security and military domain. The totality of the evidence, however, strongly suggests that even if China is not Vietnam’s preferred partner, it is always an unavoidable one.

Therefore, Hanoi’s top priority will be to maintain positive ties with Beijing—its unavoidable partner—to ensure a peaceful and stable environment for economic development. Acute bilateral challenges, nevertheless, seem to have already convinced the VCP to significantly upgrade the U.S.-Vietnam partnership. This trend is almost certain to continue as China pushes its expansive and overlapping sovereignty claims with Vietnam in the SCS. Indeed, U.S.-Vietnam security ties could dramatically ramp up if tensions reach a breaking point or armed conflict begins.

Vietnam triangle as the main example, see Brantly Womack, “Managing the Vietnam-China-United States Triangle,” *Journal of Science*, Vol. 32, No. 1S, 2016. For discussions on China’s intent in Vietnam, see, for example, Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015; Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. For modes of Chinese economic influence against Vietnam, see, for example, Joseph Y. S. Cheng, “Sino-Vietnam Relations in the Early Twenty-First Century: Economics in Command?” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 51, No. 2, March–April 2011. For ideology and national interests as a source of Chinese influence over Vietnam, see, for example, Carlye A. Thayer, “Sino-Vietnamese Relations: The Interplay of Ideology and National Interests,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 34, No. 6, June 1994. For a broader look at China’s use of influence in Southeast Asia, see, for example, Evelyn Goh, “The Modes of China’s Influence: Cases from Southeast Asia,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 54, No. 5, September–October 2014.

¹³ For more on RAND’s framework and the reasoning behind it, see Bonny Lin, Michael S. Chase, Jonah Blank, Cortez A. Cooper, Derek Grossman, Scott W. Harold, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Lyle J. Morris, Logan Ma, Paul Orner, Alice Shih, and Soo Kim, *Regional Responses to U.S.-China Competition in the Indo-Pacific: Study Overview and Conclusions*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-4412-AF, 2020.

Table 1.1. Variables for Assessing Relative U.S.-China Influence

Source of Influence	Type	Description
Diplomatic and political		
Diplomatic and political ties	Shared interest	How diplomatically and politically important the United States or China is to the partner and the extent of diplomatic ties
Support for U.S. versus Chinese vision for the region	Shared interest	How the partner's views of the ideal regional order aligns with the U.S. vision for the region and U.S. values versus assessed Chinese vision and values for the region
Views of U.S. commitment to the region	Shared interest	How confident (or not confident) the partner is about U.S. commitment or staying power in the region
Public opinion	Shared interest	Relative public perceptions of favorability of the United States versus China
Economic		
<i>Economic dependence</i>	Relative capability	The partner's current economic dependence on the United States versus China, measured by aggregating trade, investment, and tourism
<i>Economic opportunity</i>	Relative capability	How much the partner believes the United States versus China can provide future economic benefits
<i>Threat perceptions of the United States versus China (economic)</i>	Relative capability	How much the partner views U.S. or Chinese economic influence as potentially threatening, subversive, or coercive
Willingness to work with the United States versus China based on economic threat perceptions	Shared interest	Whether the partner's economic threat perception encourages it to work more with the United States or China to balance against the other economically
Military and security		
<i>Threat perceptions of the United States versus China (military)</i>	Relative capability	How much the partner views the United States or China as a military or security threat
Willingness to work with the United States versus China based on military threat perceptions	Shared interest	Whether the partner's military threat perception encourages it to work more with the United States or China to balance against the other militarily
Support for major U.S.-led security efforts	Shared interest	How much the partner generally supports the United States on security issues through its participation in or opposition to major U.S.-led international or regional security efforts
<i>Military cooperation</i>	Relative capability	How much the partner is working closely with the United States versus China militarily
<i>U.S. versus Chinese military capability</i>	Relative capability	How the partner views U.S. versus Chinese military capability
Perception of U.S. willingness to aid Vietnam in conflict with China	Shared interest	How confident (or not confident) the partner is about U.S. willingness to come to its military defense in a potential conflict involving China

NOTE: Variables measuring shared interests are roman, and variables measuring relative capability are italicized.

At least for the time being, however, it is difficult to see how Vietnam might begin favoring the United States over China. As the far larger economic and military partner in the asymmetric relationship, China maintains a preponderance of influence in Vietnam based on shared history and culture, as well as shared political and economic systems. And the most significant factor is

immutable: geography. Simply put, living next to China makes every Vietnamese decision have real consequences for Vietnam’s survival and success.¹⁴ The dark reality is that Vietnam has been invaded by China multiple times over the millennia. An oft-quoted ancient saying in Chinese—and subsequently adopted by Vietnam, once again underscoring the intense Chinese cultural influence over Vietnam—is “distant water will not quench the fire nearby” (Chinese: 远水救不了近火; Vietnamese: *Nước xa không thể cứu lửa gần*). In other words, Vietnam cannot count on external partners to help manage problems with China. Therefore, it is Vietnam’s—and solely Vietnam’s—responsibility to ensure that China-Vietnam ties are in good shape, otherwise there might be trouble.

A Note on Sources

The findings in this report are undergirded by four distinct sources of evidence. The first is the academic and policy literature, which provides context on Vietnam’s security policy and how it is managing growing U.S.-China competition. These reports were produced by both Western and Vietnamese scholars and experts. The second consists of official and unofficial Vietnamese policy statements in English—on government websites, the state-run press, or elsewhere—which afford a better understanding of Hanoi’s predicament. The third is Vietnamese-language primary sources on Vietnam’s security policy, including Vietnam’s defense journals, the VCP’s journal, leadership speeches, state-run media, think tank papers, government statements, and social media and blog postings. These sources tend to provide insights and a level of detail not normally available in English sources. It is noteworthy that many, if not most, of these sources have never been translated into English, making this report unique for considering them. RAND translated many of these reports. The fourth consists of interviews conducted in English during a visit to Vietnam in April 2019, courtesy of the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV). While on the ground, members of the project team conducted structured analytic interviews with dozens of Vietnamese interlocutors, including government officials, think tank researchers, journalists, and academics, as well as foreign government representatives and Western journalists. Several pieces of information also stem from interviews conducted for a separate project in Vietnam in August 2017.¹⁵ These interviews were essential because they offered a behind-the-scenes look at Vietnamese thinking on Vietnam’s relationships with both the United States and China. The interviews also complement the other three sources, offering many new and important insights that have been incorporated into the narrative.

¹⁴ For an overview on the asymmetry of China-Vietnam relations, see Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

¹⁵ Scott W. Harold, Derek Grossman, Brian Harding, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Gregory Poling, Jeffrey Smith, and Meagan L. Smith, *The Thickening Web of Asian Security Cooperation: Deepening Defense Ties Among U.S. Allies and Partners in the Indo-Pacific*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3125-MCF, 2019.

2. Vietnam's Goals, Regional Outlook, and Military Modernization

Vietnam's near-exclusive security threat comes from the growing economic and military power of its much larger neighbor to the north, China.¹⁶ For Vietnam, China poses a threat not only in the SCS, where the two nations have many unresolved sovereignty disputes, but also from the strengthening grip of Beijing's BRI in Vietnam. Indeed, Vietnamese leadership has been fixated on ways to mitigate the China threat in these dimensions, and, central to its strategy, Hanoi has brought in regional and global partners—specifically, the United States, but also Australia, India, and Japan. However, because Vietnam must find ways to coexist living at China's doorstep, Hanoi has simultaneously sought to find ways to tamp down areas of disagreement by maintaining cordial and productive bilateral relations.

Hanoi's highly calibrated approach to and maintenance of a delicate balance in bilateral relations between the United States and China seeks to maintain the national interests of Vietnam—i.e., to ensure that it remains “an independent, sovereign and united country, which in its territorial integrity comprises its mainland, islands, territorial waters, and airspace.”¹⁷ Hanoi's approach, however, is increasingly under siege and difficult to maintain as U.S.-China ties have deteriorated significantly in recent years over trade, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the SCS, and other issues. Nevertheless, Vietnam persists in hedging, as it feels that there is no viable alternative.¹⁸

Hanoi's security strategy is born of a painful Cold War experience seared into the minds of VCP leaders. In 1978, Vietnam aligned with the Soviet Union against China to combat Chinese proxy forces in the form of the Khmer Rouge in neighboring Cambodia. Beijing subsequently decided to severely punish Vietnam through economic sanctions and by covert support to the Khmer Rouge to “bleed Vietnam white.”¹⁹ China also launched attacks at their shared border

¹⁶ Hanoi perceives other, lesser threats from Southeast Asian maritime counterclaimants in the SCS, most notably Indonesia, with whom Vietnam had a violent fishing clash in early May 2019. See, for example, Rieka Rahadiana, “Indonesia Sinks 13 Vietnamese Boats in War on Illegal Fishing,” Bloomberg, May 4, 2019.

¹⁷ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, trans., “The Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam,” 2013, Article 1.

¹⁸ Multiple RAND interviews with foreign affairs experts. However, views of the extent to which Vietnam should balance the United States and China varied. Several interlocutors believed that Vietnam should forge stronger ties with the United States, while others did not think that relations with China were that bad—with the significant exception of tensions in the SCS. If Hanoi elevated relations with Washington, however, it would be imperative to not appear *against* Beijing.

¹⁹ According to Brantly Womack, China covertly supported the Khmer Rouge forces for years against Vietnam. Beijing's mission was to “give energetic support to Cambodia.” “[W]e did our best in all aspects, except for sending our own soldiers there,” said Keng Piao. See Womack, 2006, p. 196, citing Keng Piao, “Keng Piao's Report of the Situation of the Indochinese Peninsula,” *Issues and Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1, January 1981. Beijing, for example, sent “more than 1,500 advisers . . . along with complete equipment for three divisions as well as food, medicine, and ammunition for 100,000 troops.”

starting in 1979 to “teach Vietnam a lesson.”²⁰ In addition, ASEAN, in conjunction with China, the United States, and other Western nations, formed an economic sanctions regime aimed at Vietnam, which saw many of them cancel economic assistance. And, in 1986, the Soviet Union and China normalized relations, leaving Vietnam out in the cold.²¹ Thus, it is highly unlikely that Hanoi would once again choose between great powers unless its national interests were severely threatened. Sustained tensions with China during this period, along with severe domestic socioeconomic challenges, contributed significantly to the VCP’s decision by the mid-1980s to chart an entirely different path, and it adopted two specific policy steps to do so.

First, in late 1986 at the Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (Sixth Party Congress), the VCP implemented the watershed policy of *Đổi Mới*, which liberalized Vietnam’s economy and enabled it to interact with nonsocialist economies, both bilaterally and through multilateral economic institutions. Interestingly, *Đổi Mới* was mostly focused on normalizing relations with Vietnam’s largest economic partner, China, but it simultaneously authorized economic interactions with other countries as well.²² As part of *Đổi Mới*, the VCP in May 1988 adopted Resolution 13, “On the Tasks and Foreign Policy in the New Situation,” which articulated Hanoi’s intent to make “more friends, fewer enemies” by forging a “multi-directional,” or, as the Vietnamese also call it, an “omni-directional” foreign policy. This led to an emphasis on pursuing relations with ASEAN, Japan, Europe, and the United States.²³

Within the context of Resolution 13, the VCP assessed that, “with a strong economy, just enough national defense capability, and expanded international relations, [Vietnam] will be more able to maintain [its] independence and successfully construct socialism.”²⁴ In 1992, Vietnam’s then–Deputy Foreign Minister Tran Quang cowrote that, “at present, the enemies of Vietnam are

²⁰ Lee Lescaze, “Peking and Hanoi Teach Each Other a Lesson,” *Washington Post*, March 18, 1979.

²¹ For an authoritative overview of this history, see Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vietnam’s Foreign Policy in an Era of Rising Sino-U.S. Competition and Increasing Domestic Political Influence,” paper presented at the Conference on Great Power Rivalries, Domestic Politics, and Southeast Asian Foreign Policy, Dorothy Borg Research Project, Weatherhead East Asia Institute, New York, November 10–11, 2016a. Also see Vu Tuan Anh, *Vietnam’s Economic Reform: Results and Problems*, Hanoi: Vietnam’s Institute of Economics, 1994, p. 10.

²² Hong Hiep Le, *Living Next to the Giant: The Political Economy of Vietnam’s Relations with China Under Doi Moi*, Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017a; Hong Hiep Le, “Vietnam’s Domestic-Foreign Policy Nexus: Doi Moi, Foreign Policy Reform, and Sino-Vietnamese Normalization,” *Asian Politics and Policy*, Vol. 5, No. 3, June 25, 2013.

²³ See Thayer, 2016a; Hong Hiep Le, 2013; Phan Doan Nam, “Ngoai giao Viet Nam sau 20 nam doi moi” [“Vietnam’s Diplomacy After 20 Years”], *Tap chi Cong san [Communist Review]*, July 14, 2006; and Nguyen Manh Hung, “Thuc hien nhat quan dong loi doi ngoai doc lap, tu chu, hoa binh, hop tac va phat trien” [“Consistently Implementing the Foreign Policy of Independence, Autonomy, Peace, and Development”], *Tap chi Cong san [Communist Review]*, September 17, 2006.

²⁴ Resolution 13, along with many other VCP resolutions, remains classified within Vietnam. However, according to Hong Hiep Le, we know about them because many have been referenced or excerpted by Vietnamese researchers associated with government-affiliated think tanks in *Tap chi Cong san (Communist Review)*. In this case, my quotations of Resolution 13 were cited in Tung Nguyen Vu, “Vietnam’s Security Challenges: Hanoi’s New Approach to National Security and Implications to Defense and Foreign Policies,” in *Asia Pacific Countries’ Security Outlook and Its Implications for the Defense Sector*, Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies, 2010.

poverty, famine, and backwardness; and the friends of Vietnam are all those who support us in the fight against these enemies.”²⁵ Resolution 13 sanctioned the development of these new relationships based on Vietnam’s *national* interests—a stark departure from the previous *class*-based view of the country’s interests that had largely limited Hanoi’s interactions to only other socialist states in the Soviet camp. Since the resolution was issued in May 1988, every party congress has reaffirmed it in some form or another.²⁶ More recently, the 12th Party Congress in January 2016 stated: “To ensure successful implementation of foreign policy and international integration,” the party will “consistently carry out the foreign policy of independence, autonomy, peace, cooperation, and development” and “diversify and multilateralize external relations.”²⁷

The second policy step transforming Vietnamese security policy arrived in July 2003, when the VCP issued Resolution 8, “On Defense of the Homeland in the New Situation.” Resolution 8 transitioned Vietnam away from a foreign policy defined strictly by ideology in favor of one based on national interests. In the resolution, the VCP noted that Vietnam must “cooperate and struggle” in world affairs with all countries—even struggling against friends and cooperating with adversaries, when necessary—to protect its national interests. This shift was driven in substantial measure by the need to strengthen Vietnam’s position against growing threats posed by China in the SCS—i.e., the “new situation” (more on this below).

Taken together, these two major policy shifts underscore the great extent to which Hanoi was willing to expand international engagement with *any* country—including the United States—that could support Vietnam’s economic development and consequently its ability to avoid overdependence on a single or small number of foreign actors. Geopolitical calculations based on national interest resulted in a dramatic expansion of bilateral relationships from the late 1980s through the early 2000s. Indeed, just in terms of its total number of diplomatic partners, Hanoi expanded its formal diplomatic ties from 23 in 1989 to 163 by 1995.²⁸ In particular, the period between 1991 and 1995 witnessed Hanoi either establishing or normalizing relations with key countries, including China, the United States, India, Japan, numerous European countries, and ASEAN members.²⁹

²⁵ Tran Quang Co, “The gioi va chau A—Thai binh duong sau chien tranh lanh” [“The Post-Cold War World and Asia-Pacific”], *Tap Chi Nghien Cuu Quoc Te* [*IIR International Studies Review*], December 1992.

²⁶ Thayer, 2016a.

²⁷ Nguyen Phu Trong, “Redouble Efforts to Build Our Party Clean and Strong; Promote the Entire Nation’s Strength and Socialist Democracy; Push Forward Comprehensively and Harmoniously the Renewal Process; Defend Firmly the Homeland and Maintain Sturdily a Peaceful and Stable Environment; and Strive for Ours to Soon Become Basically an Industrialized Country Toward Modernity,” 12th Party Congress, January 2016a. Quote cited from Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vietnam’s Proactive International Integration: Case Studies in Defense Cooperation,” presentation to Section 1 Foreign Relations, International Cooperation and Integration, paper presented at the 5th International Conference on Vietnamese Studies, Hanoi, December 15–16, 2016b.

²⁸ Thayer, 2016a.

²⁹ Carlyle A. Thayer, “Internal Southeast Asian Dynamics: Vietnam’s Membership in ASEAN,” in Hadi Soesastro and Anthony Bergin, eds., *The Role of Security and Economic Cooperation Structures in the Asia Pacific Region: Indonesian and Australian Views*, Jakarta: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 1996.

There are at least two other security policy documents and a self-restrictive defense policy that undergird Vietnam's overall national security policy. Regarding security policy documents, in October 2013, the VCP announced that the Party Central Committee issued Resolution 28-NQ/TW, "On National Defense Strategy in the New Situation," which indicates that Hanoi's intent is to continue balancing among major powers. The resolution reads, in part, that Vietnam must find ways of "enhancing the cooperation to create intertwined strategic interests between [Vietnam] and others, especially large powers, strategic partners, neighbors and regional countries; avoiding conflicts, confrontation, isolation, and dependence."³⁰

A second security policy document of importance is the defense white paper from the Vietnamese Ministry of National Defence (MND). The MND has published four defense white papers: in 1998, 2004, 2009, and 2019.³¹ In addition to outlining the core roles and missions of the Vietnamese People's Army (VPA), these papers tend to provide some external security environment context for Vietnamese defense policy and activities. Of note, unlike the 2009 version of the paper, which exclusively characterized Hanoi's relationship with Beijing in cordial and cooperative terms, the 2019 paper sours on China when it comes to SCS disputes. Overall, the paper appears to warn China that Vietnam might have to strengthen defense ties with the United States if China's assertiveness persists in the region.³²

Finally, one of the major obstacles to deepening substantive cooperation—particularly in the defense domain—is Vietnam's adherence to a concept known as "the Three No's" defense policy. Apparently first disclosed in the 1998 defense white paper and reiterated in all other defense white papers, the Three No's consist of (1) no formal military alliances, (2) no military basing on Vietnam's territory, and (3) no military activities aimed at a third country. In its latest defense white paper, released in November 2019, Vietnam added a fourth "no," which was no first use of military force in international relations. The white paper further introduced the "One Depend," which essentially opened the door to bending or even breaking the Four No's if Vietnam's external security environment worsened.³³ Although Three No's in November 2019

³⁰ Quoted in Thai Binh, "Fundamentals of the National Defense Strategy in the New Situation," *National Defence Journal*, June 10, 2014.

³¹ MND, *Vietnam: Consolidating National Defence, Safeguarding the Homeland*, Hanoi, 1998; MND, *Vietnam's National Defence in the Early Years of the 21st Century*, Hanoi, 2004; MND, *Vietnam National Defence*, Hanoi, 2009; MND, *2019 Viet Nam National Defence*, Hanoi, 2019.

³² Derek Grossman and Christopher Sharman, "How to Read Vietnam's Latest Defense White Paper: A Message to Great Powers," *War on the Rocks*, December 31, 2019.

³³ The defense white paper further notes that, "*depending on the circumstances and specific conditions* [emphasis added], Vietnam will consider developing necessary, appropriate defense and military relations with other countries" (MND, 2019). Although Hanoi in the 2009 defense white paper also underscored the need for strengthening bilateral defense ties with countries that could support Vietnamese national interests, the addition of the italicized clause in the 2019 version indicates there is now a causal linkage between the deterioration of Vietnam's external security environment and the nations with which it chooses to deepen defense cooperation. A reasonable interpretation of this is that, if China's bullying behavior in the SCS continues, Vietnam might finally promote America's status to that of a "strategic partnership"—signaling mutual long-term interest to balance against China.

became “Four No’s and One Depend,” I am nevertheless henceforth using “Three No’s” in this report, as it is the more commonly understood term for the foundational principle of Vietnam’s defense policy. The Three No’s policy has had real-world consequences for Vietnamese defense diplomacy when attempting to respond to China’s actions in the SCS. According to an interview with a Vietnamese defense expert, the Three No’s policy was actually created to appease Beijing by signaling clear, self-imposed redlines on Vietnam’s defense exchanges.³⁴ But as China-Vietnam tensions continue to rise in the SCS, there is perhaps increasing space for U.S.-Vietnam defense cooperation despite the constraints of the Three No’s policy.³⁵

The New Situation with China

Overlapping sovereignty disputes between China and Vietnam in the SCS have always been an area of bilateral friction. In January 1974, a brief naval clash between South Vietnamese and Chinese PLA Navy (PLAN) warships resulted in Vietnam’s total loss of territorial holdings in the Paracel Islands. Another brief encounter in the Spratly Islands in March 1988 resulted in the deaths of dozens of Vietnamese sailors at Johnson South Reef and the loss of the reef itself.³⁶ In May 2014, China moved the Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil rig into Hanoi’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ) off the coast of the Paracel Islands that overlaps with large swaths of ocean claimed under Beijing’s “nine-dash line” boundary in the SCS. Beijing’s decision sparked a months-long maritime standoff, with China sending overwhelming force to the region, including not only Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) and People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM), but PLAN and PLA Air Force (PLAAF) assets as well.³⁷ Although the PLA did not fire shots during the standoff, the CCG rammed a number of Vietnamese vessels until the incident ended when Beijing withdrew the oil rig after regional and international condemnation.

The severity of the Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil rig incident clearly convinced VCP leaders that the relative calm in the SCS since March 1988 was over. Following the incident, a new term—the *new situation*—started to appear in conjunction with China more regularly in party speeches, official documents, and conversations that RAND had with Vietnamese interlocutors to underscore the deterioration of Vietnam’s security environment as a result of China’s increasingly assertive behavior. Indeed, since 2014, Vietnamese language has been much more direct and pointed. During Vietnam’s 12th Party Congress in January 2016, a permanent member of the party’s secretariat, Le Hong Anh, gave an authoritative speech that described the SCS as

³⁴ RAND interview with Vietnamese analysts at an international affairs think tank, Hanoi, April 2019.

³⁵ For an in-depth discussion on the “Three No’s Policy” and its implications for U.S. defense policy, see Derek Grossman and Dung Huynh, “Vietnam’s Defense Policy of ‘No’ Quietly Saves Room for ‘Yes,’” *The Diplomat*, January 19, 2019.

³⁶ For an authoritative analysis, see Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2015.

³⁷ For a recounting of the oil rig standoff timeline, see, for example, Hong Hiep Le, *Trends in Southeast Asia: Vietnam’s Alliance Politics in the South China Sea*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015a, pp. 6–7.

being the most challenging area for Vietnam in recent years.³⁸ Then, at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2016, Senior Lieutenant General and Deputy Defense Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh for the first time used the term *đấu tranh chính trị* (political struggle) to describe Hanoi's increasingly antagonistic relationship with Beijing.³⁹ Vinh noted that although Vietnam seeks to strengthen cooperation with China "to find common points in strategic interests," it simultaneously must "struggle openly with a constructive spirit." He went on to state that China was responsible for "changes to the status quo along with the threat of militarization."⁴⁰ At the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018, Defense Minister Ngo Xuan Lich, during his keynote address said, "Regarding the issue of the East Sea [the Vietnamese term for the SCS], . . . under no circumstances could we excuse militarization by deploying weapons and military hardware over disputed areas against regional commitments."⁴¹

Many other official Vietnamese statements over the past few years indicate strong concerns over Beijing's intent and activities in the SCS. While attending the ASEAN-China Senior Officials' Meeting, for instance, Deputy Foreign Minister Nguyen Quoc Dung stated that "the current situation in the SCS may pose risks of serious, unexpected incidents threatening peace, security, and stability in the region and in the world due to increased militarization and strategic competition among large powers."⁴² According to President Tran Dai Quang in 2016, "the recent worrying developments in the region and the SCS have had negative impacts on the security environment of the region, especially maritime security and safety, freedom of navigation and overflight, threatening to erode trust and affecting the cooperation process of the region. Should we allow instability to take place, especially in the case of armed conflicts, there will be neither winner nor loser, but rather all will lose."⁴³ Do Thanh Hai, a senior fellow at the DAV, affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), assessed that "China is perceived as the greatest threat in terms of its intention to dominate the sea and its capabilities to do so, but Vietnam persistently works to preserve its ties with China and stick to an autonomous defense posture."⁴⁴ He also emphasized separately in 2018 that, "by all accounts, China represents a conceivable

³⁸ Van Hieu, "Report on Criticism of XI Central Committee's Leadership," *Voice of Vietnam*, trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, January 21, 2016.

³⁹ For his full statement, see Nguyen Chi Vinh, "The Challenges of Conflict Resolution," speech presented at the 15th Asia Security Summit, Shangri-La Dialogue, International Institute for Strategic Studies, Singapore, June 5, 2016.

⁴⁰ Vinh, 2016.

⁴¹ Ngo Xuan Lich, "General Ngo Xuan Lich, Minister of National Defence, Vietnam," speech delivered at the 17th Asia Security Summit, Shangri-La Dialogue, International Institute for Strategic Studies, Singapore, June 2, 2018.

⁴² H. Lien, "SOM ASEAN—Trung Quốc 16: Tình hình Biển Đông có nguy cơ dẫn đến những sự cố nghiêm trọng" ["ASEAN-China SOM 16: SCS Situation May Pose Risks of Serious Incidents"], *Lao Dong*, October 27, 2018.

⁴³ Vietnam News Agency, "President Tran Dai Quang's Speech at Singapore Lecture," *VietnamPlus*, August 30, 2016.

⁴⁴ Do Thanh Hai, "Vietnam's Management of China's Maritime Assertiveness in the Post-Cold War Period," *Asian Forum*, February 22, 2016.

threat to Vietnam. . . . Living next door to China, Vietnam has reason to be anxious about its neighbor's rapid naval modernization."⁴⁵

VPA commanders have certainly taken notice of China's aggressive behavior in the SCS as well. In 2012, for example, Major General Nguyen Thanh Tuan, director general of Communication and Training Department at the MND, identified China as the main threat to Vietnamese territorial integrity in the SCS, asserting that China had made a long-term strategy with a three-phase road map to monopolize the SCS: "legal foundation, actual law enforcement, and monopolistic domination."⁴⁶ He added, "What if China conspires to unilaterally dominate the SCS by force? Our government, especially the military, has made plans for all the options to cope with the lowest to the highest scenarios. Even the Chinese generals assert that it only takes a week for China to fight and capture the entirety of the Spratly Islands, but China can hardly maintain the occupation of them."⁴⁷

In January 2019, the VCP once again publicly reiterated its deep concern about China's behavior in the SCS. Tran Nguyen Tuyen of the Central Council of Theories, an influential advisory committee for the VCP, assessed that the "long-term and consistent objective of China is to realize the sovereignty of the 'U-shape' line by continuing to build artificial islands from illegal occupation of [Vietnam's] reefs and militarizing the East Sea [SCS] in order to monopolize the domination of the East Sea. . . . [T]his is a direct threat to national security and Vietnamese sovereignty over sea and islands at present and in the future."⁴⁸ With perhaps as many as 1 million fishermen and 120,000 fishing boats throughout the country's EEZ, VCP leaders have emphasized linkages between coastal economic development and the ability to access and exploit resources in the SCS. In other words, the SCS is Vietnam's economic lifeline, with significant implications for maintaining the country's sovereignty, security, and domestic policy stability. Such concerns have clearly prompted the VCP to instruct the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) to be on guard for anti-China sentiment to spread in Vietnam stemming from future China-Vietnam incidents in the SCS. In a video clip unofficially posted in March 2017, Major General Truong Giang Long of the MPS revealed rarely open comments: "China never abandons its cruel intention to capture our territory in the East Sea [SCS]; the point is when and how it will act."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Do Thanh Hai, "Vietnam: Riding the Chinese Tide," *Pacific Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2018.

⁴⁶ "Bảo vệ biển đảo bằng vũ khí hiện đại nhất thế giới" ["Defend the Sea and Islands by the World's Most Cutting-Edge Weapons"], *Tienphong*, September 29, 2012.

⁴⁷ "Bảo vệ biển đảo bằng vũ khí hiện đại nhất thế giới" ["Defend the Sea and Islands by the World's Most Cutting-Edge Weapons"], 2012.

⁴⁸ Tran Nguyen Tuyen, "How to Bring Vietnam into a Nation Strong and Prosperous from the Sea?" *Communist Review*, January 29, 2019.

⁴⁹ Thoibao.de, "Video: Tiết lộ động trời của Thiếu tướng Công an Cộng sản Trương Giang Long" ["Video: Shocking Revelation of Communist Major General Truong Giang Long"], YouTube, March 12, 2017. Also see "Vì sao Tướng Trương Giang Long nghỉ chờ hưu?" ["Why Is Gen. Truong Giang Long Pending for Retirement?"], BBC Vietnamese, October 5, 2017.

Finally, up until October 2019, Vietnam and China had been embroiled in yet another months-long standoff at Block 06-01 near Vanguard Bank—a key hydrocarbon extraction point in the SCS.⁵⁰ China sailed its geological survey vessel, the *Haiyang Dizhi 8* to the area, and after refueling at Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratly Islands, the ship came back to loiter in Vietnam’s EEZ for several weeks before heading back to China. During the standoff at Vanguard Bank, Beijing employed both CCG and PAFMM, and Hanoi responded by dispatching Vietnam Coast Guard (VCG) and other law enforcement vessels from Cam Ranh Bay. Block 06-01 is particularly sensitive because it falls within Hanoi’s 200-nautical-mile EEZ and provides Vietnam with approximately 10 percent of its energy resources via pipeline.⁵¹ China’s main point of protest seems to have been Hanoi’s joint production of the site with countries external to the SCS, including the United States, Russia, and Japan. *Haiyang Dizhi 8* began to depart Vietnam’s EEZ following the end of drilling operations. Vietnam’s inability to get China to back down without the termination of international drilling operations has probably prompted Hanoi to consider other “struggle” options, such as taking legal action against Beijing or deepening security cooperation with Washington.⁵²

Vietnam’s Military Modernization

The VPA has responded to China’s growing assertiveness in the SCS in several ways.⁵³ Hanoi recognizes that it cannot possibly compete with PLA modernization because of defense budget constraints (Vietnam spends about \$5 billion annually on defense, whereas China spends approximately \$146 billion), so it has instead attempted to cut costs by purchasing systems from multiple countries beyond its traditional supplier, Russia. These countries include France, India, Israel, Japan, Ukraine, and the United States. The VPA has primarily focused on investing in and procuring offsetting and retaliatory capabilities. Notably, the VPA is building capabilities that currently include six Russian-built *Kilo*-class submarines, along with a complementary network of antiaccess missiles. Russian-built Bastion-P shore-based antiship cruise missiles and Israeli-made SPYDER surface-to-air missile defense systems seek to guarantee that PLAN and PLAAF

⁵⁰ Derek Grossman, “Why Vanguard Bank and Why Now? Explaining Chinese Behavior in the South China Sea,” *Maritime Issues*, August 16, 2019b; “China Risks Flare-Up over Malaysian, Vietnamese Gas Resources,” *AMTI*, July 16, 2019.

⁵¹ Hanoi is concerned about Beijing’s actions at Vanguard Bank and what it indicates about Chinese intent. According to Do Thanh Hai of the DAV, for example, “From Vietnam’s perspective, China is deliberately attempting to turn ‘undisputed waters’ into ‘disputed spaces’ as a pretext to prevent coastal states from working with international oil firms in these areas, a term China is pressing in the Code of Conduct negotiations.” See Do Thanh Hai, “Vietnam Confronts China in the South China Sea,” *East Asia Forum*, December 6, 2019b.

⁵² James Pearson and Khanh Vu, “Vietnam Mulls Legal Action over South China Sea Disputes,” Reuters, November 6, 2019. For other “struggle” options Vietnam might consider, see Derek Grossman, “Vietnam Needs to ‘Struggle’ More in the South China Sea,” *The Diplomat*, November 15, 2019c.

⁵³ For an overview of Vietnam’s military modernization and its intentions vis-à-vis China in the SCS, see Derek Grossman, “Can Vietnam’s Military Stand Up to China in the South China Sea?” *Asia Policy*, Vol. 13, No. 1, January 2018a.

operations within Vietnam’s EEZ would encounter lethal and heavy resistance in the event of an attack on the homeland or against disputed islands.

The Vietnam People’s Navy (VPN) has also procured systems capable of close naval encounters, such as the Russian-built *Gepard*-class frigates and *Tarantul V*-class corvettes (*Molniya* project). In the air domain, the Vietnam Air Defence–Air Force (VAD-AF) has modernized its fleet with Sukhoi Su-30MK2 multirole aircraft, which have the range to strike targets throughout the SCS and on the Chinese mainland. Although Vietnam possesses these naval and air capabilities, the VPA probably has not invested in the requisite realistic training to operate them successfully. As a traditionally land-centric power, Vietnam also likely has not yet sufficiently prepared for conducting joint operations in the air and naval domains.⁵⁴

Vietnam has greatly expanded its capabilities to launch a “people’s war at sea” in an attempt to compete with large numbers of CCG and PAFMM vessels in disputed waters.⁵⁵ Beijing has very effectively been able to employ large numbers of PAFMM during every major SCS standoff since using the force to help defeat South Vietnam in January 1974 at the Battle of the Paracel Islands. These *gray zone* operations seek to win the war without firing a shot by both changing the facts on the ground and covertly supporting conventional military operations.⁵⁶ One of Vietnam’s forces that competes in the gray zone is the VCG. Today, the VCG fields the largest coast guard force in Southeast Asia and is larger than the coast guard forces of the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia—all archipelagic nations—combined. These paramilitary maritime vessels are lightly armed with deck-mounted gun turrets and crew members carrying firearms to conduct maritime law-enforcement activities and tactical reconnaissance and maritime surveillance in the SCS.⁵⁷ In July 2019, Vietnam authorized the VCG to operate in international waters to counter China’s gray zone tactics.⁵⁸

Vietnam is separately building its own fishing militia to rival China’s PAFMM. Precise numbers are difficult to come by, but the force might have 8,000 boats or more. Either way, Vietnamese leaders hope to add thousands more mostly steel-hulled boats (instead of wooden, which were damaged and sunk during the oil rig standoff in May 2014), but this could be cost-

⁵⁴ See Grossman, 2018a.

⁵⁵ Like most concepts, Vietnam has adopted the term “people’s war at sea” from China. For China’s use, see, for example, James Holmes, “A ‘People’s War’: How China Plans to Dominate the South China Sea,” *National Interest*, May 2, 2019. For Vietnam’s conception of the concept, see Derek Grossman and Nguyen Nhat Anh, “Deciphering Vietnam’s Evolving Military Doctrine in the South China Sea,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 11, 2018.

⁵⁶ For more on gray zone conflicts, see, for example, Lyle J. Morris, “Gray Zone Challenges in the East and South China Sea,” *Maritime Issues*, January 7, 2019.

⁵⁷ Nguyen Nhat Anh, trans., “Ảnh hòa lực đáng gờm trên tàu Cảnh sát biển Việt Nam” [“Images of Fearsome Weapons on Vietnam Coast Guard Ships”], *Kien Thuc News*, April 27, 2016.

⁵⁸ Vietnam News Agency, “New Law Enables Vietnam Coast Guard to Operate Outside Vietnamese Waters,” *VietnamNet Global*, July 6, 2019.

prohibitive.⁵⁹ In addition, Vietnam has the civilian-led Vietnam Fisheries Surveillance Force serving in a constabulary role. These forces can also quickly and inexpensively “flood the zone” of a potential maritime standoff. They are reportedly armed with machine guns and explosives to augment the VCG’s and the fishing militia’s capabilities.⁶⁰

One of the major shortcomings of the VPA, however, is in the area of maritime domain awareness (MDA). Vietnam has struggled to collect basic intelligence on the SCS region. Examples of MDA platforms the VPA has invested in include the U.S. ScanEagle 2 drone, six Canadian DHC-6 Twin Otter Series 400 amphibious aircraft, and the Japanese-built ASNARO-2 earth observation satellite. Vietnam has also allowed India to set up a satellite imaging and tracking program on its soil. But there remains much work to be done in MDA, which is a critical enabler of joint operations.

Finally, Vietnam is conducting some land reclamation at disputed outposts in the region where it maintains a de facto presence. These activities not only are designed to solidify Vietnamese sovereignty claims but could also support VPA operations in the future. Hanoi, for example, has expanded some infrastructure and dredged the northern channel at Ladd Reef.⁶¹ In August 2016, Vietnam apparently deployed Israeli-built Extended Range Artillery (EXTRA) guided rocket artillery launchers on several of the disputed features it controls.⁶² These systems have sufficient range to destroy Chinese military infrastructure throughout the Spratly Islands. Later, in November 2016, Vietnam had also extended its sole runway in the Spratly Islands—on Spratly Island itself—and built a new aircraft hangar there.⁶³ Vietnam has also added signals intelligence or communications sites to Spratly Island, topped with a large radome in 2018.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ For more on Vietnam’s fishing militia, see Nguyen Khac Giang, “Vietnam’s Response to China’s Militarized Fishing Fleet,” *East Asia Forum*, August 4, 2018. For more on “people’s war at sea,” see Grossman and Anh, 2018.

⁶⁰ “Vietnam Fisheries Surveillance Force Vessels to Be Equipped with Weapons: New Decree,” *Tuoi Tre News*, August 1, 2014; Government of Vietnam, “Regulation on Equipping, Managing and Using Military-Grade Weapons, Supporting Equipment and Specialized Apparatus by the VFSF and Directorate of Fisheries” [“Thông tư liên tịch số 01/2015/TTLT-BCA-BNNPTNT: Quy định về trang bị, quản lý, sử dụng vũ khí quân dụng, công cụ hỗ trợ và thiết bị chuyên dùng của lực lượng kiểm ngư”], Joint Circular No. 01/2015/TTLT-BCA-BNNPTNT, trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, January 13, 2015; Lam Son, “Lực lượng kiểm ngư được trang bị vũ khí quân dụng” [“Vietnam Fishery Resource Surveillance Is Equipped with Military-Grade Weapons”], *Lao Dong*, trans. Nguyen Nhat Anh, February 26, 2015.

⁶¹ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies, “Vietnam Expands Another Outpost,” June 13, 2018.

⁶² Greg Torode, “Exclusive: Vietnam Moves New Rocket Launchers into Disputed SCS—Sources,” Reuters, August 9, 2016.

⁶³ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies, “Updated: Vietnam Responds with Spratly Air Upgrades,” November 15, 2016.

⁶⁴ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies, “Slow and Steady: Vietnam’s Spratly Upgrades,” April 8, 2019.

Conclusion

Vietnam's national security strategy remains focused on balancing between China and the United States, even as their great-power competition heats up and complicates Vietnam's calibration. VCP leaders are increasingly concerned about China's BRI and expansive sovereignty claims in the SCS; to address the latter, Vietnam has embarked on a military modernization program and attempted to enhance its ability to operate in the gray zone—particularly by leveraging its VCG, Vietnam Fisheries Surveillance Force, and fishing militia forces.

3. Key Drivers of Vietnam's Foreign Policy

Vietnam's leadership and domestic politics are key drivers of foreign policy, coloring the nature of relations with both China and the United States. Vietnam is a one-party authoritarian regime that operates through a collective leadership structure composed of the "four pillars" (*tứ trụ*): the VCP general secretary (Nguyen Phu Trong), prime minister (Nguyen Xuan Phuc), president (also Trong, as the position was consolidated after Tran Dai Quang died in September 2018), and chairperson of the national assembly (Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan). In general, only after months or even years of painstaking negotiation can the VCP eventually reach governing consensus on an issue, subsequently unveiled at party congresses held approximately every five years.⁶⁵ This adds an extra layer of authoritative quality to statements emanating from the VCP and other senior-level government officials. It also makes it nearly impossible that Vietnam could become akin to fellow socialist countries North Korea and, to a lesser extent, China, which both feature highly centralized Leninist systems with power concentrated in a single dictator's hands. Although not quite "checks and balances," the system has, to date, effectively prevented overreach by any one power center. Indeed, according to a former Vietnamese official, Vietnamese can still "feel" events of modern China, such as the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen Square, simultaneously implying sympathy for the Chinese people who suffered during these traumatic events and the unfathomability that the VCP could ever commit such atrocities in Vietnam.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, there are concerns that President Quang's death has given General Secretary Trong too much power. According to one perspective, he is now the "Xi Jinping of Vietnam" because he admires Xi's strongman tactics, such as his anticorruption campaign—a version of which Trong has implemented to purge his own political opponents.⁶⁷ To be sure, Trong has consolidated the presidency under the general secretary position. However, the other power centers—specifically, the prime ministership under Phuc, who is considered fairly pro-United States—are considered extremely powerful. Unless or until this position is consolidated as well, the system of four pillars is likely to remain intact.⁶⁸ Either way, Trong is rumored to have suffered a stroke in April 2019 and probably will be forced to step down at the next party congress in January 2021 if he is viewed as not being up to the job.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Party congresses became routinized in 1975. Prior to that, they were held less often and less predictably.

⁶⁶ RAND interview with former Vietnamese official, Hanoi, April 2019.

⁶⁷ David Hutt, "All of Vietnam's Power Is in Trong's Hands," *Asia Times*, October 4, 2018.

⁶⁸ Paul Schuler and Mai Truong, *Leadership Reshuffle and the Future of Vietnam's Collective Leadership*, Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, February 22, 2019.

⁶⁹ John Boudreau and Nguyen Kieu Giang, "Vietnam Says President to Return to Work Soon Following Health Worry," Bloomberg, April 25, 2019.

Domestic politics affecting Vietnam’s delicate balancing act between China and the United States are driven by two opposing and ingrained trends. On the one hand, there is the VCP’s deep-seated and long-standing relationship with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Party-to-party ties are derived not only from communist comradeship but also from past cooperation at all levels against French and American forces during the first and second Indochina wars respectively. On the other hand, visceral hatred of China among the Vietnamese people (more on this below) has served as an undeniable check on VCP decisionmaking, constantly auguring against trusting Beijing.

Vietnam and China, Forever Comrades-in-Arms

Shared experiences throughout their long history, particularly similarities in language, religion, and culture, serve to bind Vietnam and China together. Communist revolutionary cooperation between the VCP and CCP forged in the early and mid-20th century has significantly boosted the mutual sense of comradeship felt among the respective leaderships in Hanoi and Beijing. Notably, the father of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh, fomented socialist unrest in China in 1925 and served as an adviser in 1938 to the CCP as it worked to expel the Japanese. In 1954, the CCP supported VCP (Viet Minh) efforts to defeat the French at Dien Bien Phu and, later in the 1960s and early 1970s, offered safe haven and supplies to the Vietnamese communist forces throughout the war against the United States.

Despite the China-Vietnam hostilities that followed—whether at the Paracels in 1974, at the border in 1979, at Johnson South Reef in 1988, or in recent years in the SCS with various other incidents—party-to-party ties have proved quite resilient and not easily broken. The vast amount of influence the CCP maintains over the VCP cannot be overstated or ignored when considering modern Vietnam. Indeed, most policy ideas are either imported wholesale from China or have some connection to Vietnam’s larger northern neighbor. For example, as mentioned above, General Secretary Trong has launched his own anticorruption campaign to mirror Xi’s initiative. In addition, the VPA’s concept of “people’s war at sea” and the establishment of its own fishing militia are heavily influenced by how the Chinese are building capabilities in the maritime domain. The VCP’s new cybersecurity law, implemented in 2019, is virtually identical to China’s version.⁷⁰ One can plausibly argue that Đổi Mới itself came from observing Beijing’s own reform and opening-up policy in 1978. There are many other examples of Vietnamese mimicking of Chinese concepts and behaviors. Significantly, the direction of influence goes in only one direction: China to Vietnam.

Past periods of extensive VCP-CCP cooperation have also solidified a common party line, especially among the generation alive during the Vietnam War (though notably less so among

⁷⁰ The Vietnamese and Chinese versions were compared by a Vietnamese interlocutor. RAND interview with Vietnamese media expert in Ho Chi Minh City, April 2019.

the younger generations)—that the secret goal of the United States and other Western powers is to move Vietnam toward *peaceful evolution*. *Peaceful evolution* is code for the West clandestinely exporting democratization to Vietnam, and VCP paranoia is especially triggered at the mention of *human rights*.⁷¹ The term is integrally connected to Chinese (and Russian) narratives that the West, through its intelligence services, has attempted to foment domestic unrest in authoritarian states throughout the Caucasus and Central Asia in the mid-2000s, as well as the Middle East in the early 2010s. Vietnam, so the argument goes, could be next.⁷²

At times, VCP-CCP ties have become highly problematic within the context of Vietnamese domestic politics because party-to-party exchanges tend to produce policy results that raise suspicions among the people that the party does not always prioritize Vietnamese national over ideological or parochial party interests. In June 2018, the VCP, for example, attempted to push forward a new law authorizing the establishment of three special economic zones (SEZs) in Vietnam—a concept first created in China as part of its reform and opening-up policy, begun in 1978.⁷³ The draft SEZ law stated that “a country near the border”—with no specific mention of China—would be allowed to sign 99-year leases and receive preferential investment terms in the new SEZs.⁷⁴ Tens of thousands of Vietnamese across the country protested the SEZ legislation, and anti-China sentiment spilled onto the streets, catching the VCP off guard.⁷⁵ Eventually, Prime Minister Phuc noted that the government welcomed the “enthusiastic feedback” of the people and that revisions to the draft law may be in progress. Reconsideration of the bill is unlikely to occur, however, until at least 2021 or 2022 (if it happens at all), probably to allow for a cooling-off period and for the next party congress to consider the stability implications.⁷⁶

But this is hardly the only time the VCP has seemingly acquiesced to China. Since the May 2014 oil rig standoff in the SCS, the VCP has typically censored reporting of subsequent Chinese ramming of Vietnamese fishing boats to avoid anti-China sentiment that results in violence.⁷⁷ Relatedly, the VCP in March 2018 backed down from allowing the Spanish company Repsol from drilling in disputed areas of the SCS—the second such time it has done so at the behest of Beijing.⁷⁸ In the run-up to General Secretary Trong’s visit to Beijing to participate in the second

⁷¹ RAND interview with Vietnamese think tank expert, Hanoi, April 2019.

⁷² See, for example, Nguyen Dinh Bac, “New Peaceful Evolution Artifices by Hostile Forces Against Vietnam’s Revolution,” *National Defence Journal*, April 2, 2018. For connections between “peaceful evolution” and Chinese narratives of “color revolutions,” see John S. Van Oudenaren, “Beijing’s Peaceful Evolution Paranoia,” *The Diplomat*, September 1, 2015; and Seth Mydans, “U.S. and Vietnam Build Ties with an Eye on China,” *New York Times*, October 12, 2010.

⁷³ Nguyen Minh Quang, “SEZs in Vietnam: What’s in a Name?” *The Diplomat*, September 14, 2018.

⁷⁴ RAND interview with Vietnamese economics expert, Hanoi, April 2019.

⁷⁵ Khanh Vu and Mai Nguyen, “China Warns Citizens in Vietnam After Protests over Economic Zones,” Reuters, June 11, 2018.

⁷⁶ David Hutt, “Vietnam Seeks to Slow China Inflows,” *Asia Times*, May 30, 2019.

⁷⁷ RAND interview with Vietnamese foreign affairs expert, Hanoi, April 2019.

⁷⁸ James Pearson and Henning Gloystein, “Vietnam Halts SCS Oil Drilling Project Under Pressure from Beijing,” Reuters, March 22, 2018.

annual BRI forum (ultimately, Prime Minister Phuc attended instead, as Trong fell ill), members of the Vietnamese media were apparently instructed to conduct a total blackout of negative China coverage.⁷⁹

Overall, VCP decisionmaking is suspicious to the average Vietnamese in the context of pro-China policy initiatives. Indeed, one of our Vietnamese interlocutors opined that extensive VCP-CCP cooperation during the Vietnam War likely gave the CCP lots of useful information it could exploit to control the VCP.⁸⁰ Conspiracy theories have even come from senior-ranking officials in the party. For example, the president of the Political Academy of the MPS stated that China had “implanted” hundreds of operatives into Vietnamese government agencies, suggesting that Beijing maintains some kind of underhanded control over Vietnam.⁸¹ Regardless, VCP-CCP cooperation is near certain to continue.

Vietnamese Society’s Extreme Anti-China Sentiment

As mentioned, the Vietnamese populace is viscerally anti-Chinese, and the VCP must respect its wishes to some extent to, from the VCP’s perspective, preserve domestic stability. For example, according to polling analysis conducted by the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, a mere 6 percent of respondents thought that Vietnam should seek to strengthen ties to China.⁸² By contrast, the same study found that 92 percent of respondents favored strengthening ties to the United States. The latest Pew Research Center poll published in 2017 on global attitudes and trends found that 88 percent of Vietnamese people held an unfavorable view of China—the highest unfavorability of China for any country displayed in the study (Japan was 83 percent unfavorable, in second place). A mere 10 percent of Vietnamese people viewed China favorably, according to the Pew poll.⁸³

At an anecdotal level, the interlocutors RAND interviewed proposed that the Vietnamese population overwhelmingly has strong negative feelings against China. Few people in Vietnam choose to study Chinese as a second language, and, to the contrary, English is the preferred second language. This is in spite of the fact that Beijing regularly offers fully paid scholarships to study in China.⁸⁴ By contrast, the establishment in 2016 of the U.S. Fulbright University Vietnam in Ho Chi Minh City is widely hailed as a major coup for Vietnam to offer a world-

⁷⁹ RAND interview with Vietnamese academic expert, Ho Chi Minh City, April 2019.

⁸⁰ RAND interview with Vietnamese foreign affairs expert, Hanoi, April 2019.

⁸¹ “Vì sao Tướng Trương Giang Long nghỉ chờ hưu?” [“Why Is Gen. Trương Giang Long Pending for Retirement?”], 2017.

⁸² Cu Chi Loi, “Public Opinion Is Strong Foundation for Future U.S.-Vietnam Relations,” *cogitAsia*, Center for Security and International Studies, July 22, 2015. RAND interview with Vietnamese government think tank official, Hanoi, April 2019.

⁸³ Richard Wike, “Global Attitudes Toward China and the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, September 21, 2017.

⁸⁴ RAND interview with Vietnamese academic expert, Ho Chi Minh City, April 2019.

class education in English and in part served as a rebuke of Beijing.⁸⁵ China has one only Confucius Institute in all of Vietnam, and it is located in Hanoi. Although it is not uncommon in Southeast Asia to have only one, the interlocutors explained that by allowing China to have just one, Vietnam can continue to maintain cordial ties publicly, but privately, according to one Vietnamese interlocutor, the Vietnamese people believe that these institutes have a corrosive influence and do not want them in the country.⁸⁶ Perhaps the one Vietnamese community favorably disposed toward China is the business community, but those voices have been drowned out.⁸⁷

Escalating China-Vietnam tensions in the SCS play a significant role in negative Vietnamese public opinion of China. According to the DAV senior fellow Do Thanh Hai, Chinese coercion of Vietnamese fishermen in the past decade has caused widespread anger and resentment from the Vietnamese people that has “translated into collective action.”⁸⁸ Public opinion has called for the VCP to adopt a stronger position against Chinese aggression. For example, in late March 2019, nine Vietnamese groups and 260 individuals, including scholars and former government officials, signed the “Announcement on the Paracels and Spratlys of Vietnam.” The announcement opposed Chinese administration, coercion, and harassment in the SCS and called on Hanoi to file a case against China in international court.⁸⁹

Beyond the SCS, the average Vietnamese person strongly dislikes China not only because of the tumultuous history of Chinese invasions of Vietnam over the millennia (most recently in 1979) but also because of the perception—real or imagined—that Beijing today somehow controls Hanoi in spite of the wishes of the people. Regarding the draft SEZ law, many Vietnamese (including overseas Vietnamese) have cautioned against the risks of growing Chinese influence on Vietnam’s security and economy. In 2009, for instance, many Vietnamese protested against the VCP’s decision to allow a Chinese company to mine bauxite—a key mineral in the production of aluminum—in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Summing up public sentiment, a major general and former ambassador to China, Nguyen Trong Vinh, opined: “[I]f we let China mine bauxite in the Central Highlands, there will be five, seven, or ten thousand Chinese laborers (or soldiers) coming to live and get busy there. In this infinitely important militarily strategic region of ours, they will turn the place into a ‘Chinese town,’ [or] a ‘military base’ (where bringing in weapons would not be difficult either).”⁹⁰ In a more recent

⁸⁵ RAND interview with Vietnamese academic expert, Ho Chi Minh City, April 2019.

⁸⁶ RAND interview with Vietnamese foreign affairs expert, Hanoi, April 2019.

⁸⁷ RAND interview with Vietnamese economics expert, Hanoi, April 2019.

⁸⁸ Do Thanh Hai, “China’s Maritime Actions Fuel Popular Anger in Vietnam,” *Korea Times*, March 30, 2019a.

⁸⁹ “Tuyên bố về quần đảo Hoàng Sa và Trường Sa của Việt Nam” [“Announcement on the Paracels and Spratlys of Vietnam”], *Dien Dan [Forum]*, April 5, 2019.

⁹⁰ Nguyen Trong Vinh, “Thư của thiếu tướng đại sứ Nguyễn Trọng Vinh,” *Dien Dan*, 2009, cited in Jason Morris, “The Vietnamese Bauxite Mining Controversy: The Emergence of a New Oppositional Politics,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of California Berkeley, 2013. The bauxite mine controversy awakened Vietnamese activism. See, for

example of Vietnamese suspicions, Hanoi in April 2019 rejected China’s bid to have its telecommunications firm, Huawei, participate in establishing Vietnam’s new 5G network—largely because of fears of potential spying.⁹¹

The VCP in recent years has tried to find ways to allow the people to vent their anger at China’s growing influence in Vietnam without roiling the entire bilateral relationship. During the draft SEZ law tensions of June 2018, for example, the VCP for the most part did not attempt to stop protestors from gathering over many days throughout the summer and across Vietnam—even though political activities greatly concern the VCP. Separately, the VCP for 40 years has censored media coverage and discussions over the highly sensitive issue of the China-Vietnam border war in 1979. However, starting in February 2019 and marking the 40th anniversary of the event, the VCP has now authorized referring to the conflict as indeed a “war” and to China as an “invader.”⁹² Vietnamese media in recent months has similarly been given greater leeway in describing, and even commemorating, past naval skirmishes with China in the Paracels in 1974 and Spratlys in 1988. Such moves—contrary to the VCP’s preferences and instincts—strongly suggest that the party cannot completely disregard anti-China sentiment in Vietnam.

Conclusion

Although Vietnam, like China, is a one-party authoritarian socialist republic, it bears little resemblance in terms of governance structure. Vietnam has four power centers—general secretary, president, prime minister, and chairperson of the national assembly—that must build consensus to carry out the daily operations of statecraft. Nevertheless, VCP-CCP relations are quite close, and Beijing in many cases has provided a ready-made template for policy implementation in Vietnam of such ideas as the cybersecurity law, SEZ law, or the creation of a fishing militia. The extremely warm and opaque nature of VCP-CCP relations has caused much angst among the local Vietnamese population, who are suspicious and usually distasteful of all things Chinese. Thus, the VCP has occasionally allowed the venting of grievances to preserve domestic stability.

example, Mac Lam, “Thư ngỏ, hãy thay đổi người nhận” [“Open Letters, Change the Addressee”], *Voice of America*, October 30, 2018.

⁹¹ Hong Hiep Le, “Vietnam Races to Launch 5G Network, but Chinese Tech Giant Huawei Notably Left Out of Plan,” *South China Morning Post*, May 3, 2019b.

⁹² RAND interview with Vietnamese academic expert, Ho Chi Minh City, April 2019. Also see, for example, “Bốn bài học từ cuộc chiến chống Trung Quốc xâm lược năm 1979” [“Four Lessons from the War Against Chinese Invasion in 1979”], *VnExpress*, February 18, 2019.

4. Vietnam's Ties to China and the United States

Vietnam is ultimately a “security seeker,” in the words of one of our Vietnamese interlocutors.⁹³ This means that it will strenuously seek to preserve positive relations, preferably with both China and the United States, but might also choose between them if Hanoi’s national interests are threatened. Within this context, China is increasingly threatening the territorial integrity of Vietnam in the SCS—a trend auguring closer U.S.-Vietnam relations, especially defense ties. However, concerns over unnecessarily antagonizing Beijing—as well as lingering concerns among VCP leaders over “true” U.S. intentions, particularly regarding the export of democracy to Vietnam (known as *peaceful evolution*)—mitigate the prospects of deepening ties. Beyond China and the United States, which Vietnam would likely consider first and second, respectively, in terms of importance to its national security strategy, Vietnam also has the following partners, possibly in descending order of priority: ASEAN, India, Russia, Japan, Australia, and South Korea. Chapter 5 covers Vietnam’s defense relationships with these countries in depth.

China: The Unavoidable Partner

On the surface, one might expect Vietnam and China to get along quite well. Both are ruled by communist parties that have implemented wildly successful economic reforms to survive the crisis of communism in the 1980s and early 1990s. Indeed, based on the origins of the two movements, their struggles to seize power, extended periods of cooperation, and their efforts to unify their respective countries, one might assume that cordial, if not warm, relations exist. This, however, is hardly the case.

Although China is a fellow socialist country, Vietnam also regards China as its greatest historical threat, recalling more than 1,000 years of domination by its northern neighbor. Although the two sides closely cooperated during North Vietnam’s subversion and conquest of South Vietnam, today many Vietnamese regard China as untrustworthy, given its covert support of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the 1979 border war in which Beijing attempted to invade northern Vietnam, China’s seizure of disputed territories in the Paracels in 1974 and Johnson South Reef in 1988, a months-long standoff in 2014 over China’s emplacement of an oil rig in disputed waters, and another months-long standoff in 2019 at Vanguard Bank in Hanoi’s EEZ.

Sustained hostility with China, however, is simply impractical and would threaten the very survival of the Vietnamese state. Thus, starting with bilateral normalization in November 1991,

⁹³ RAND interview with Vietnamese foreign affairs think tank expert, Hanoi, April 2019.

the two nations have deepened contacts and expanded trade and investment while also resolving some of the thornier aspects of their relationship, including demarcating their land border and agreeing on the division of the Gulf of Tonkin.⁹⁴

China and Vietnam in 2008 raised the description of their relationship to that of a *comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership*—the highest form of partnership that Hanoi grants to major-power countries.⁹⁵ Vietnam maintains only two other “comprehensive strategic partners,” Russia (2012) and India (2016), underscoring the extremely high priority that Vietnam places on exchanges with China (see Chapter 5 for more details on Vietnam’s partnership designations). Hanoi’s addition of the term *cooperative* to the name of the partnership for China indicates that Beijing retains a special status in Vietnamese foreign policy, even though bilateral friction in such areas as the SCS almost certainly limits security and defense cooperation. In truth, China is more akin to Vietnam’s *unavoidable partner*—a much larger and more powerful neighbor not always aligned with Hanoi, but one that must be engaged regardless.

For example, China and Vietnam continue to engage in joint confidence-building measures in the maritime domain in spite of their deep differences. The two sides annually conduct joint fisheries cooperation, and the latest friction at Vanguard Bank did not dissuade Hanoi from dispatching the VCG to participate in the 18th round of joint fishery patrols with the CCG in the Gulf of Tonkin in October 2019, and again in April 2020.⁹⁶ Additionally, although Vietnam is highly distrustful of China’s BRI, it nevertheless signed off on the initiative in November 2017.⁹⁷ China is Vietnam’s top trading partner, valued at approximately \$106.7 billion, composing just over 22 percent of Vietnam’s total trade, once again underscoring just how unavoidable China is to Vietnam.⁹⁸

Cooperative aspects of bilateral relations aside, Vietnam is deeply concerned that it runs the risk of becoming overly dependent on China even as U.S.-China competition continues to heat up. For example, according to the president of the DAV, Nguyen Vu Tung, “the direct pressure from the rise of China has driven [Vietnam] into the Chinese influential circle of geostrategy, raising the reliance on the Chinese economy and larger pressure from China’s promotion of soft

⁹⁴ Isaac B. Kardon, “The Other Gulf of Tonkin Incident: China’s Forgotten Maritime Compromise,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 21, 2015.

⁹⁵ The exceptions to this rule are the special cases of Laos and Cambodia. Vietnam-Laos relations are reportedly closer than any other partnership Hanoi maintains abroad because of deep cooperation forged during the Vietnam War. In addition to being comprehensive partners, Vietnam and Laos are bound in “special solidarity.” See “Preserving and Promoting Vietnam-Laos Special Solidarity,” *Nhan Dan*, January 6, 2019. Separately, Vietnam helped save Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge in 1979—solidifying the nature of their special ties for decades.

⁹⁶ Chinese Coast Guard, “中越海警开展2019年第二次北部湾联合检查” [“China and Vietnam Maritime Police Launch Second Joint Inspection of Beibu Gulf in 2019”], WeChat, November 1, 2019; “Vietnam, China Coast Guards Conduct Joint Patrol,” *People’s Army Newspaper Online*, April 21, 2020.

⁹⁷ “China, Vietnam Sign Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Cooperation of Development Initiatives,” *Xinhua*, November 12, 2017.

⁹⁸ “Vietnam’s 10 Biggest Trading Partners,” *Customs News*, January 21, 2019.

power in the region.”⁹⁹ Separately, writing in the *National Defence Journal*, Sr. Col. Le The Mau argued that “China hopes to create a new world order with the Beijing Consensus via many strategic plans, the centerpiece of which is ‘Belt and Road’ and ‘Made in China 2025.’”¹⁰⁰ Tran Cong Truc, former head of the National Border Committee, further stated that “the ambition and dream to become the center of the world has ever been a strategic goal shaping all the activities of Chinese leaders through all the historical eras.”¹⁰¹ He also warned against the “debt trap” and “legal and sovereignty trap” with BRI running through the SCS.¹⁰² Overall, Vietnamese views of China’s rise are quite dim.

Military Cooperation with China Circumscribed

Although Vietnam and China maintain a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership, normally implying substantial defense and security exchanges, actual bilateral cooperation in these domains is lacking because of Vietnam’s suspicions of China’s intent and activities in the SCS. The issue of defense cooperation with China is also very sensitive and politically charged in Vietnam, where anti-China sentiment tends to run high.

Nevertheless, senior-level defense leadership visits have been occurring annually between the two countries for years. Vietnamese Defense Minister Lich visited China in August 2016 at the request of General Chang Wanquan, which was later followed up on in October by three Chinese warships visiting the Cam Ranh International Port (commercial section) near the sensitive Vietnamese Cam Ranh Bay military base.¹⁰³ Then, in 2017, Chinese General Fan Changlong, vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, visited Vietnam to meet with General Secretary Trong, Prime Minister Phuc, and President Quang. These meetings apparently became tense because General Fan stressed that China has owned disputed SCS features since ancient times. Hanoi’s official response was less directly disagreeable, and, instead, Vietnamese leaders insisted that China sign up to a binding CoC.¹⁰⁴ However, General Fan apparently did not

⁹⁹ Nguyen Vu Tung, “Những thuận lợi, khó khăn và những vấn đề đặt ra trong xử lý mối quan hệ giữa độc lập, tự chủ và chủ động tích cực hội nhập quốc tế đối với nước ta trong thời gian tới” [“Advantages, Challenges, and Issues for Handling the Relations Between Independence, Autonomy and Proactive International Integration for Our Nation in the Future”], *Central Council of Theories*, September 14, 2018a.

¹⁰⁰ Le The Mau, “The Changing Geopolitics of East Asia and Its Implications for Regional Security,” *National Defence Journal*, February 20, 2019b.

¹⁰¹ Tran Cong Truc, “Chiến tranh Vệ quốc 1979 và cách ứng xử trong quan hệ quốc tế ngày nay” [“The 1979 National Defensive War and How to Handle Current International Relations”], *Giao Duc [Education]*, February 5, 2019a.

¹⁰² Tran Cong Truc, “Bẫy nợ trong sáng kiến ‘Vành đai và Con đường’” [“Debt Traps in the Belt and Road Initiative”], *Giao Duc [Education]*, March 23, 2019b; Tran Cong Truc, “Cạm bẫy pháp lý, chủ quyền trong sáng kiến ‘Vành đai và Con đường’” [“Legal and Sovereignty Traps in the Belt and Road Initiative”], *Giao Duc [Education]*, March 24, 2019c.

¹⁰³ Xuan Hoa, “Vietnamese Defense Minister Departs on First Official to China,” *VNExpress International*, August 29, 2016. For more information about the Chinese warship port visit, see My Pham, “Chinese Naval Ships Set for First Visit to Vietnam’s Cam Ranh International Port,” Reuters, October 20, 2016b.

¹⁰⁴ Yao Jianing, “Senior Chinese Military Official Visits Vietnam,” *China Military Online*, June 19, 2017.

appreciate what he heard from Vietnamese leaders in private, and he subsequently cut his trip short.¹⁰⁵ In a rebound of sorts, General Lich visited Beijing again in 2018, and both ministers discussed the need to implement the Joint Vision Statement on Defense Cooperation through 2025, signed in January 2017. The statement includes furthering areas of practical cooperation between the PLA and VPA in coast guard patrols and joint fisheries management in the previously delineated Gulf of Tonkin (not in the SCS). As demonstrated by Deputy Defense Minister Vinh's visit to Beijing in February 2019, the vision statement also includes many noncontroversial areas, such as military medicine, human resources, search and rescue (SAR), and peacekeeping operations (PKO).¹⁰⁶ Most recently, in May 2019, Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe visited Vietnam on his way to the Shangri-La Dialogue. The readout from his meeting with Defense Minister Lich indicates that they signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on military medicine cooperation, an agreement on military staff training for the academic year, and an MoU on military education between the Chinese National Defense University and the Vietnamese National Defense Academy.¹⁰⁷ However, given the low-threat nature of their interactions, the MoU should largely be viewed as symbolic rather than representative of deep substantive collaboration.

Vietnamese interlocutors offered that, though severely circumscribed, Vietnam-China security ties are actually quite healthy. The two sides, for example, opened an emergency hotline following the May 2014 oil rig crisis to avert an escalation of incidents in the future.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, joint VCG-CCG patrols of the previously disputed Gulf of Tonkin and border guard exchanges along the previously disputed land border continue to be held annually.¹⁰⁹ On the Gulf of Tonkin patrols, the MND is considering adding navy-to-navy exchanges. Regardless, these activities would be limited to an already delineated region and not in the heavily disputed SCS. To be sure, Hanoi in April 2019 sent a frigate to the PLAN's fleet review to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PLAN. However, this was almost certainly a symbolic

¹⁰⁵ Catherine Wong and Kristin Huang, "Top Chinese General Cuts Short Vietnam Trip amid South China Sea Tensions," *South China Morning Post*, June 22, 2017. It is unclear what was said to General Fan, but the Chinese claimed that he canceled border defense talks "for reasons related to working arrangements."

¹⁰⁶ Vien Nhu, "Deputy Defense Minister Visits China," *Socialist Republic of Vietnam Online Newspaper of the Government*, February 20, 2019. To be sure, the joint vision statement also included a few more intriguing areas. The first is defense industry. It is unclear specifically how or, more precisely, whether China and Vietnam are cooperating in this domain. If so, what is the cooperation producing? Second, the two sides have emphasized army-building as an objective of defense relations. Obviously, their lengthy history of comradeship during the wars against France and the United States makes it easier to work on the "people's war" together. But the PLA and VPA are actually building capabilities and developing tactics to launch the people's war in a gray zone scenario against each other in the SCS. Thus, to what extent the PLA might *currently* have any measure of influence over VPA doctrine and operational concepts remains somewhat of a mystery.

¹⁰⁷ "Vietnamese, Chinese Defence Minister Hold Talks," *Vietnam News*, May 28, 2019.

¹⁰⁸ RAND interview with Vietnamese defense think tank staff, Hanoi, April 2019. Also see Carl Thayer, "China-Vietnam Hotline Agreed: What Next?" *The Diplomat*, October 20, 2014.

¹⁰⁹ RAND interview with Vietnamese defense think tank staff, Hanoi, April 2019.

gesture and nothing more.¹¹⁰ Significantly, there are no air force exchanges between Vietnam and China. Army-to-army ties are progressing, although it is difficult to ascertain the true nature of these exchanges. They probably remain frosty as animus continues to run high following the border war in 1979.

China's Enormous Economic Leverage over Vietnam

The most important economic relationship—and, to be sure, overall bilateral relationship—that Vietnam maintains is with China. As noted, China is Vietnam's top trading partner.¹¹¹ Outflows of Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) to Vietnam in 2018 was approximately \$1.15 billion.¹¹² Chinese tourist visits compose at least 29.5 percent of total tourist visits to Vietnam and perhaps as much as 33 percent, providing Vietnam with an important source of economic activity. According to one estimate, Chinese tourists spend on average \$130 each per day, and their spending has been on the rise.¹¹³ If spending rises by 30 percent, then that could, according to another estimate, increase Vietnam's GDP by 1 percentage point.¹¹⁴ Vietnam is also home to just over 1 million ethnic Chinese, known as Han or Hoa people, and around 500,000 live in Ho Chi Minh City.¹¹⁵ Even though they represent less than 6 percent of the urban population, ethnic Chinese own 30 percent of the licensed businesses there.¹¹⁶ Although suspicions of their intentions and influence run high in Vietnam, recent academic research strongly suggests that these ethnic Chinese tend to contribute significantly to Vietnam's overall economic well-being.¹¹⁷

Another key aspect of China's economic engagement and leverage in Vietnam is BRI. Hanoi is a participating country in the program and in April 2019 sent Prime Minister Phuc (as noted, General Secretary Trong was supposed to attend but fell ill) to the second annual BRI forum. At the forum, Phuc emphasized the importance of the public-private partnership investment model for Vietnam and welcomed increased Chinese investment.¹¹⁸ Phuc's acceptance of President Xi's

¹¹⁰ Vu Anh, "Vietnamese Frigates Sail to China for Naval Review," *VNExpress International*, April 15, 2019b.

¹¹¹ "Vietnam's 10 Biggest Trading Partners," 2019.

¹¹² Statista, "Annual Flow of Foreign Direct Investments from China to Vietnam Between 2008 and 2018," October 2019.

¹¹³ This estimate is from the Vietnam National Administration for Tourism, cited in Nguyen Quy, "Vietnam Becomes China's Second Largest Tourism Market," *VNExpress*, April 2, 2019.

¹¹⁴ Bloomberg report cited in Quy, 2019.

¹¹⁵ "The 2009 Vietnam Population and Housing Census," cited in Yuk Wah Chan, "'Vietnam Is My Country Land, China Is My Hometown': Chinese Communities in Transition in the South of Vietnam," *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2018, note 8.

¹¹⁶ Tran Khanh, *The Ethnic Chinese and Economic Development in Vietnam*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993.

¹¹⁷ Tuan Anh Nguyen-Viet and Masami Imai, "The Effects of Ethnic Chinese Minority on Vietnam's Regional Economic Development in the Post-Vietnam War Period," *Journal of Development Studies*, November 5, 2017, Vol. 54, No. 29, 2018.

¹¹⁸ "PM Phuc Meets Chinese Party Chief and President Xi Jinping in Beijing," *Viet Nam News*, April 26, 2019.

offer to attend the forum and to reaffirm the importance of BRI between the two nations belies deep Vietnamese suspicions of not only the economic but also the security consequences of BRI involvement.

For example, according to the Ministry of Planning and Investments, there are six challenges with economic ties to China (that are also manifested in BRI): (1) the opening of a large trade deficit; (2) Vietnamese firms colluding with Chinese firms to make fake goods; (3) statistics for bilateral trade are not timely, detailed, or complete; (4) Chinese traders' negative impact on sustainable development and supply and demand of local goods; (5) Chinese FDI projects producing low-quality goods; and (6) projects financed by China's official development assistance (ODA) and other official loans not helping improve Vietnam's economy and partners.¹¹⁹ According to Pham Quy Tho, former head of the Public Policy Department of the Ministry of Planning and Investment, "Vietnam is influenced by the Chinese economic model, which has revealed macro issues in the past decade and thus Vietnam should have more open discussions to avoid Chinese mistakes."¹²⁰ Estimated Vietnamese debt to China has reached \$6 billion as of 2018, possibly leading Vietnam into a Chinese debt trap.¹²¹ Additionally, Le Dang Doanh, former head of the Central Institute of Economic Management, highlighted risks from trade deficit and loans from China, especially for coal-fired power plants that cause pollution and public opposition.¹²² In 2018, the Ministry of Planning and Investment also warned against using Chinese ODA loans.¹²³ Troublingly, Chinese FDI in Vietnam focuses on natural resource extraction and has resulted in environmental pollution because of outdated, energy-intensive, and polluting technology. Beijing's FDI has further been followed by numerous Chinese workers residing in Vietnam.¹²⁴ China has taken advantage of free trade agreements (FTAs) and challenged Vietnamese firms, and Vietnamese goods incorporating Chinese raw material inputs could be negatively affected by U.S. tariff impositions or sanctions.¹²⁵

¹¹⁹ Luong Bang, "Six Issues in Economic Ties with China," *Vietnamnet*, November 16, 2018.

¹²⁰ Pham Quy Tho, "Ý kiến về các khó khăn của VN do cùng mô hình với TQ" ["Opinions on Vietnamese Challenges Due to Learning Chinese Model"], BBC, March 6, 2019.

¹²¹ Vu Quang Viet, "Việt Nam mượn của Trung Quốc bao nhiêu?" ["How Much Has Vietnam Borrowed from China?"], *Saigon Times*, September 3, 2018.

¹²² Thanh Phuong, "Mối nguy từ các dự án đầu tư Trung Quốc tại Việt Nam" ["Risks from China-Invested Projects in Vietnam"], *RFI*, December 10, 2018.

¹²³ Ha Linh, "Vì sao Bộ Kế hoạch và Đầu tư cảnh báo không nên vay vốn ODA của Trung Quốc?" ["Why Did the Ministry of Planning and Investment Warn Against Chinese ODA Loans?"], *An ninh Thủ do [Capital Security]*, August 19, 2018.

¹²⁴ Nguyen Thi Thanh An, "Thu hút vốn FDI từ Trung Quốc bằng những dự án công nghệ cao" ["Attracting Chinese FDI by High-Tech Projects"], *Tap chi Tai chinh [Financial Journal]*, January 1, 2019; Cam Tu, "Vốn FDI từ Trung Quốc đổ mạnh vào Việt Nam: Đáng lo hơn mừng?" ["Chinese FDI Influx into Vietnam: More Worries Than Delights?"], *Voice of Vietnam*, April 8, 2017.

¹²⁵ Thuy Le, "Vì sao doanh nghiệp Trung Quốc đầu tư vào Việt Nam?" ["Why Do Chinese Firms Invest in Vietnam?"], *Tap chi Tai Chinh [Financial Journal]*, January 10, 2019.

Vietnam has yet to take a full accounting of BRI projects within its borders. The challenge is that Beijing has many projects predating BRI that might have since been incorporated into BRI, usually in opaque (and corrupt) ways. Chinese economic influence through this program is underexplored and not very well understood; hence, Hanoi, as of April 2019, was actively undergoing a review of all these projects.¹²⁶ The one official BRI project well-known to everyone, however, is the construction of the Hanoi metro system, as it is massively overbudgeted and behind schedule. Construction crews broke ground in 2011 and were supposed to have completed the system by 2013, but the system has yet to be fully completed. With an original price tag of around \$553 million, the final cost appears closer to \$868 million, including \$670 million in loans from China to Vietnam.¹²⁷ The project has actually become a symbolic punching bag to express Vietnamese frustration with China's BRI. To be sure, the counterpart metro project in Ho Chi Minh City funded by Japan has not fared much better in its construction, although the accident record of operational lines is better for the Japanese project.¹²⁸

These types of experiences have probably convinced Vietnamese leaders to exercise extreme caution with BRI in the future. One of RAND's Vietnamese interlocutors opined that Vietnam legally can only take on 65 percent public debt and that, as of April 2019, it was at 61 percent, suggesting that the public-private partnership plan discussed by Prime Minister Phuc with President Xi at the last BRI forum is actually a nonstarter. In essence, then, Vietnam is likely to officially remain a BRI participant to avoid angering Beijing but will also avoid actively engaging in any deals that might hurt its economy.¹²⁹ Trends in Chinese infrastructure project activity in Vietnam tend to back up this assertion. From 2005 to 2013, total Chinese construction project value was approximately \$15.7 billion, but between 2014 and 2018, the total value dropped to \$3.5 billion. China's cumulative value of investments in Vietnam, however, has increased significantly. From 2005 to 2013, investments totaled \$790 million, but between 2014 and 2018, the total project value rose to \$4.3 billion.

Vietnamese involvement in BRI has also provoked security concerns. For example, Bui Duc Anh of the MND asserted, "Some projects partnered with Chinese investors are implemented in critical locations, strategically significant to national defense and security and directly influential

¹²⁶ RAND interview with Vietnamese economics expert, Hanoi, April 2019.

¹²⁷ "Hanoi Metro Stations in Line for April Launch," *Vietnam Insider*, March 29, 2019.

¹²⁸ Michael Tatarski, "Vietnam's Tale of Two Metros, One Built by the Japanese, the Other by the Chinese," *South China Morning Post*, July 30, 2017.

¹²⁹ RAND interview with academic expert, Ho Chi Minh City, April 2019. Another example of Vietnamese caution toward China in the economic domain relates to the Two Corridors, One Belt initiative. Two Corridors, One Belt is a long-standing bilateral agreement between Vietnam and China to elevate economic interactions. It appears that the main thrust of this initiative is to provide Beijing with a route for exporting goods from Chinese inland provinces (Guangxi and Yunnan, for example) through Vietnamese gateways, such as seaports in Quang Ninh and Hai Phong, nearer to those provinces than Chinese eastern ports. Two Corridors, One Belt appears to benefit China more than Vietnam, but Hanoi supports it nonetheless, once again demonstrating the extent to which Vietnam seeks to please China. Indeed, Phuc reaffirmed the importance of Two Corridors, One Belt while meeting with Xi.

to the layout of the defense region.”¹³⁰ An ongoing potential flashpoint in this regard is Vietnam’s decision to build the North-South Expressway connecting major points throughout the country. Beijing is keen on incorporating this project into BRI, according to RAND’s interlocutors, but Vietnamese commentators have cautioned Hanoi against moving in this direction.¹³¹ For instance, in late March 2019, the collective “Announcement on the North-South Highway Project” signed by seven groups and 443 individuals, including academics, scholars, and former government officials, highlights the security, defense, and economic risks from Chinese companies in this project and thus calls for the exclusion of Chinese contractors.¹³² Pham Chi Lan, a former member of the prime minister’s Consultation Team, expressed concerns about potential Chinese loans and companies in the proposal of the North-South Expressway.¹³³ And Le Dang Doanh, former head of the Central Institute of Economic Management, is also very worried about Beijing’s proposed participation for economic, security, and defense reasons.¹³⁴ Nguyen Trung, former assistant to Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet, also wants to exclude Chinese contractors from this project.¹³⁵

And Vietnamese concerns over BRI are not just limited to Chinese projects in Vietnam. Worries also persist about the geostrategic implications of China’s BRI on Vietnam’s neighboring countries, particularly on Cambodia and Laos, and the potential impact that Chinese economic activities might have on Hanoi’s relationships with them. Vietnam is in *special strategic relationships* with both Cambodia and Laos.¹³⁶ Vietnam helped save Cambodia in 1979 from the Khmer Rouge—solidifying the nature of their special ties for decades. Vietnam and Laos are bound in *special solidarity* dating back to their deep cooperation forged during the Vietnam War. For years, Vietnam has probably served as Laos’s most important partner, with many different aspects of cooperation. According to one of our interlocutors, for example, Laotian military officers are required to study in Vietnamese military schools—underscoring the extreme intimacy of ties.¹³⁷

¹³⁰ Bui Duc Anh, “Impacts of Vietnam-China Economic Ties on Vietnamese Security and Defense,” *Tap chi Cong san [Communist Review]*, October 25, 2016.

¹³¹ RAND interviews with Vietnamese think tank staff and former officials, Hanoi, April 2019.

¹³² “Tuyên bố về Dự án Đường cao tốc Bắc-Nam” [“Announcement on the North-South Highway Project”], *Dien Dan [Forum]*, March 30, 2019.

¹³³ Pham Chi Lan, “Chuyên gia Phạm Chi Lan: Ba câu hỏi cho dự án đường cao tốc Bắc-Nam” [“Pham Chi Lan: Three Questions for the North-South Highway Project”], *Ngươi Do Thi*, April 27, 2019.

¹³⁴ Hoang Dan, “TS Lê Đăng “Doanh ”hết sức ”o ngại” việc Tập đoàn Trung Quốc đề xuất làm cao tốc Bắc—Nam” [“Dr. Le Dang Doanh Is Very Worried About the Chinese Contractor’s Proposal to Build the North-South Highway”], *Soha*, March 16, 2019.

¹³⁵ Nguyen Trung, “Việt Nam nên nói thật với Trung Quốc về đường cao tốc Bắc Nam” [“Vietnam Should Tell the Truth to China About the North-South Highway”], *Viet-studies.net*, April 7, 2019.

¹³⁶ MND, 2019.

¹³⁷ Apart from Laos, Vietnam has also trained tens of thousands of Cambodian military officers. See, for example, “Cambodian Military Alumni Gather in Ho Chi Minh City,” *Nhan Dan*, December 18, 2012.

In recent years, however, Beijing has been making uncomfortable new inroads into Laos that call into question Laos's continued alignment with Hanoi in the future. According to a former Vietnamese ambassador to Laos, Nguyen Ngoc Truong, Laos can "be dominated" and "be turned into a backyard of China" and "that would be the largest challenge to Laos." Truong further stated that Vietnam also invests in Laos but cannot "counter against the economic penetration of China in Laos."¹³⁸ Separately, Col. Quach Hai Luong, a former military attaché posted in China, observed: "China is skillful at penetration by building roads. Penetration and migration follow roads. They are planning to build a road from Yunnan all the way to the Central Highlands of Vietnam through Laos. In the last section of the road near the Central Highlands, Cambodia and Laos have leased land to Beijing for 99 years. So, the whole region is almost their land."¹³⁹ As discussed, Vietnam's draft SEZ law from 2018 prompted violent anti-China protests across the country because it was viewed as a massive concession to China at Vietnam's expense. Chinese land deals in Laos and Cambodia feature similar terms of agreement (e.g., 99-year leases of land), which, from a Vietnamese perspective, suggest that Vietnam might be the next victim of these land grabs. For example, an SEZ in Laos named Boten is a Chinese district with tourism, casinos, drugs, and money laundering, according to a Facebook post apparently aimed at warning (and possibly shaming) Hanoi against making similar deals with Beijing.¹⁴⁰

Le Anh Hung, a popular government critic and frequent writer about Chinese threats, has argued that the most important goal of China for "investment" in Cambodia is to counter Vietnam. Hung notes that, from 1994 to 2012, Cambodia leased 4.6 million hectares of land to China for 99 years and that Beijing financed Cambodian construction of a national highway to the border with Vietnam. For Hung, these developments, combined with China's recent push to build a strategic deepwater port at Koh Kong on the Gulf of Thailand, which may ultimately become a naval base, constitute "a knife pointed at Vietnamese side along the border and in the southwest sea."¹⁴¹ As of July 2019, China had also apparently signed a secret contract with Phnom Penh to construct a naval base and an air base at Ream and Dara Sakor, respectively.¹⁴² Such concerns persist in spite of Cambodian President Hun Sen's remark in December 2018 while meeting with Prime Minister Phuc: "I confirm that the constitution of Cambodia does not allow any foreign military bases in the Kingdom, [and the] Cambodian constitution does not

¹³⁸ Vien Dong, "Lào không còn là 'sân sau' của Việt Nam?" ["Laos Is No Longer a Backyard of Vietnam?"], *VOA Vietnamese*, June 5, 2016.

¹³⁹ Thien Nam, "Thận trọng, cảnh giác với đầu tư Trung Quốc vào Việt Nam" ["Wary and Vigilant of Chinese Investment in Vietnam"], *Bao Dat Viet*, July 11, 2014.

¹⁴⁰ Yến Võ, "Đặc khu kinh tế Boten ở Lào và bài học nhãn tiền" ["Boten Special Economic Zone in Laos and the Immediate Lessons"], *Bao Tieng Dan [Voice of People Media]*, June 5, 2018.

¹⁴¹ Le Anh Hung, "Thứ trưởng kiêm đại sứ và thất bại mang tên Campuchia" ["Deputy Minister cum Ambassador and the Failure in the Name of Cambodia"], *VOA Vietnamese*, December 1, 2017.

¹⁴² Jeremy Page, Gordon Lubold, and Rob Taylor, "Deal for Naval Outpost in Cambodia Furthers China's Quest for Military Network," *Wall Street Journal*, July 21, 2019.

allow foreign military base in Cambodia.”¹⁴³ Indeed, because Cambodia was a former bitter adversary of Vietnam under the Khmer Rouge, its deepening relations with China only heighten Vietnamese distrust for its neighbor, wondering whether Vietnam’s western flank might be vulnerable in a future conflict against China in the SCS.

Vietnam is also worried about the environmental and economic impact from a series of hydropower projects along the upstream part of the Mekong River in Laos and Cambodia, most of which are financed and built by China. They may cause flooding, drought, and sediment reduction, as well as have severe impacts on agricultural production and fishing in the Mekong Delta. As of May 2019, there were at least an estimated 467 hydropower plants in the upstream Mekong River, and one-fourth of them were under construction or were to be constructed in the future. There were also 20 hydroelectric dams that China plans to construct in the mainstream portions of the Mekong, outside Vietnam, with eight already built by Chinese companies.¹⁴⁴ The collapse of a Laotian hydroelectric dam in July 2018 worried many Vietnamese experts. According to Nguyen Nhan Quang, an expert on river basin management, “For Vietnam, hydroelectric dams in Laos and Cambodia are larger and nearer worries. Therefore, from the dam collapse in Laos, we need to fully assess all the risks to respond to the worst scenarios such as earthquakes or other natural disasters.”¹⁴⁵ Duong Van Ni, a scientist at Can Tho University with years of research on the impacts of hydroelectric dams on the Mekong Delta, highlighted that the complex geology of the Mekong region from China to Laos is vulnerable given the many large reservoirs under construction.¹⁴⁶ And the Vietnamese minister of natural resources and environment stated that “Vietnam is very concerned about the increasing hydropower projects in the Mekong River in recent years of upstream nations. Vietnam has recently suffered from a serious drought, salt water intrusion and subsidence.”¹⁴⁷

Of particular salience is the maintenance of sediment flow down to the Mekong Delta in Vietnam, a process that dams could prevent. Nguyen Truong Son, vice head of the General Department for Natural Disaster Management at the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, notes: “The land erosion in the Mekong Delta is partly caused by the increased economic activities focusing on hydropower by the upstream nations.”¹⁴⁸ Le Anh Tuan, vice director of the Climate Change Institute at Can Tho University, adds: “By nature, the Mekong

¹⁴³ Ven Rathavong, “No Chinese Naval Base in Cambodia,” *Khmer Times*, December 7, 2018.

¹⁴⁴ Trung Thanh, “‘Phòng thủ’ từ xa trước hiểm họa thủy điện trên dòng Mekong” [“Distant Defense Against Risks in the Mekong River”], *Phap Luat Online*, July 30, 2018.

¹⁴⁵ Nguyen Minh Quang, “‘Cuộc chiến nguồn nước’ trên dòng Mê Kông và nguy cơ Việt Nam” [“The Water Source War in the Mekong River and Threats to Vietnam”], *Tap chi Nang Luong Viet Nam [Vietnamese Energy Journal]*, August 28, 2017.

¹⁴⁶ Thanh, 2018.

¹⁴⁷ “Việt Nam giúp Lào cứu hộ sau thảm họa đập thủy điện” [“Vietnam Helps Laos for Relief After the Hydropower Dam Disaster”], *VOA Vietnamese*, July 26, 2018.

¹⁴⁸ Ha Phuong, “Hàng trăm thủy điện thượng nguồn Mekong đe dọa ĐBSCL” [“Hundreds of Hydropower Plants in Upstream Mekong Threatens the Mekong Delta”], *Zing*, March 29, 2018.

Delta was formulated by the Mekong river sediment. This region will be subsided as sediment does not flow down. Climate change problems will occur more rapidly and seriously as hydropower dams continually block the mainstream of the Mekong river.” He highlighted that the “disintegration of the Mekong Delta will nullify its role as the rice reservoir of Vietnam and cause serious impacts on national food security.”¹⁴⁹ For a country that faced mass starvation challenges in the 1980s, Vietnam is acutely aware of the potential impacts that these trends could have on its national security.¹⁵⁰

U.S.-Vietnam Progress Limited by China

After having fought on the battlefield from 1954 to 1975 and continued their confrontation as adversaries on opposite sides of the Cold War until 1991, Vietnam and the United States normalized bilateral relations in 1995. Since that time, the two sides have significantly advanced their relationship on multiple fronts, including in the economic, people-to-people, and even defense domains. All these trends are remarkable considering the grim recent history of the Vietnam War. But, as RAND’s Vietnamese interlocutors explained, Hanoi’s policy in recent years has prioritized looking toward the future rather than dwelling on the past.¹⁵¹ This guiding light has served Vietnam exceptionally well, not only with the United States but also in normalizing relations with other countries that supported U.S. military operations during the war—for example, Japan, Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines—as well as other countries opposed to communism during the Cold War. Nevertheless, lingering suspicions remain among top VCP leaders about Washington’s “true” intention and whether it aims to export democracy via a “peaceful evolution,” as explained earlier.

Today, the United States and Vietnam are *comprehensive partners*. In Vietnamese terminology, a comprehensive partnership is beneath both *strategic* and *comprehensive strategic* (or *comprehensive strategic cooperative*, in the case of China) partners, suggesting that bilateral relations still have several levels to rise. But it should also be noted that these designations are mostly symbolic and do not necessarily represent the level of actual substantive cooperation. For instance, the United States and Vietnam cooperate quite a bit on security, while Vietnam and China do not, even though the latter pair are at a higher level of partnership. Many of the Vietnamese interlocutors recommended that Washington and Hanoi should at least elevate ties to a strategic partnership, signaling a mutual long-term strategic interest implicitly to counter China. Indeed, at an official level, Hanoi has floated precisely this course of action.¹⁵² However, to date, it has not happened, probably because of concerns that it would unnecessarily antagonize Beijing. One Vietnamese interlocutor noted that Vietnam “lacks political will” to accomplish

¹⁴⁹ Phuong, 2018.

¹⁵⁰ Huong, 2018.

¹⁵¹ RAND interview with former Vietnamese officials, Hanoi, April 2019.

¹⁵² Vietnam News Agency, “VN, US Vow to Build Strategic Partnership,” *VietnamPlus*, January 29, 2011.

such a feat.¹⁵³ Another offered that the key might be to use different phraseology less familiar to China, which would take away the signaling effect. For example, referring to the United States as a “major” partner might be such a path forward.¹⁵⁴ Either way, strategic-level partners are bound by mutual long-term strategic interests, and the consensus from the interviews was that the United States and Vietnam certainly share the interest of preventing Chinese domination of the Indo-Pacific.¹⁵⁵

As of 2019, the United States was Vietnam’s third-largest trading partner, at \$60.3 billion (12.6 percent) of Vietnam’s economy.¹⁵⁶ People-to-people ties have improved significantly since the war as well. As mentioned, U.S. favorability in Vietnam stands at around 92 percent (compared with 10 percent favorability of China), and this trend has been bolstered by Washington’s commitments to clean up the herbicide and chemical defoliant it used to clear thick jungle during the war, known as Agent Orange. Estimates vary, but Hanoi states that at least 4 million Vietnamese have been exposed to Agent Orange, with perhaps as many as 3 million suffering from exposure to this toxin that has been linked to cancer, deformities, and other illnesses.¹⁵⁷ The U.S. Agency for International Development has led the decontamination effort and completed the cleanup at Da Nang Air Base in 2018. It is now focusing on Bien Hoa Air Base outside Ho Chi Minh City.¹⁵⁸ These activities are invaluable toward building trust with the average Vietnamese citizen, and they also help Vietnamese war veterans—an important segment of the population that can influence overall defense decisionmaking. The Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) is another source of strengthening people-to-people ties. LMI is a cooperative effort among Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Thailand, and the United States to improve the regional environment, along with key health, education, and infrastructure challenges.¹⁵⁹ The Vietnamese interlocutors were keen to see momentum on LMI continue because it builds trust in U.S.-Vietnam relations.¹⁶⁰

Political alignment between the respective leaderships in Washington and Hanoi has been growing in recent years. In 2015, General Secretary Trong became the first Vietnamese communist leader to visit the White House for a meeting with President Barack Obama. Then, in 2016, Obama visited Hanoi and lifted the decades-long arms embargo against Vietnam. Although he characterized the decision as just the next logical step in the normalization of bilateral ties, the human rights situation—the driver for implementing the ban in the first place—

¹⁵³ RAND interview with Vietnamese foreign affairs experts and former officials, Hanoi, April 2019.

¹⁵⁴ RAND interview with Vietnamese think tank expert, Hanoi, April 2019.

¹⁵⁵ RAND interview with former Vietnamese officials, Hanoi, April 2019.

¹⁵⁶ “Vietnam’s 10 Biggest Trading Partners,” 2019.

¹⁵⁷ Ben Stocking, “Agent Orange Still Haunts Vietnam,” Associated Press, June 14, 2007.

¹⁵⁸ Agence France-Presse, “USAID Launches Latest Cleanup of Agent Orange Site,” *Voice of America*, April 20, 2019.

¹⁵⁹ U.S. State Department, “Lower Mekong Initiative,” webpage, February 21, 2019.

¹⁶⁰ RAND interview with Vietnamese think tank expert, Hanoi, April 2019.

had not improved in Vietnam by 2016 (and today might actually be worse).¹⁶¹ Thus, Washington appears to have deemphasized the human rights factor in relations with Vietnam. Moreover, China's military rise, particularly in the SCS, has likely been of major significance in this critical decision. One year later, in May 2017, President Donald Trump welcomed Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc to the White House—the first Southeast Asian leader to receive such an invitation during the Trump administration. The outcome of this meeting was significant because it reaffirmed the intent of Washington to cooperate with Hanoi on issues of maritime security—in other words, managing the challenges posed by China in the SCS. A joint statement issued at the conclusion of that visit highlighted the Trump administration's plans to transfer a *Hamilton*-class coast guard cutter to Vietnam to assist with maritime security.¹⁶² Most importantly, the joint statement reaffirmed Washington's commitment to freedom of navigation and the settlement of all disputes in the SCS peacefully and without coercion.

Vietnamese leaders appear to support the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy, even though they have not directly come out in favor of it, almost certainly to avoid angering Beijing and to maintain Hanoi's careful balancing act between major powers. Most recently, Vietnam's 2019 defense white paper brings up the Indo-Pacific. It reads: "Vietnam is ready to participate in security and defense cooperation mechanisms . . . including security and defense mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific region."¹⁶³ By using the specific term *Indo-Pacific*, Vietnam is likely making it known (to China) that it supports the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy. It is highly significant that such an authoritative paper brought up the Indo-Pacific, as words matter greatly in Vietnam. It seems as though the only other time this has happened was when then-President Tran Dai Quang visited India in March 2018. During that trip, Quang discussed the need to uphold freedom of navigation and overflight in the SCS, as well as peaceful and legal settlement of disputes. Quang further referred to desiring "a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region."¹⁶⁴

Implicitly, Vietnam appears on board with the Indo-Pacific Strategy. For example, the Vietnamese spokeswoman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Le Thi Thu Hang, appeared to endorse the central tenet of the strategy, saying in July 2020 that "Vietnam welcomes countries' positions on the East Sea [SCS] issues which are consistent with international law and shares the view, as stated in the statement issued on the occasion of the 36th ASEAN Summit, that the

¹⁶¹ For Obama's decision to lift the arms embargo against Vietnam, see Gardiner Harris, "Vietnam Arms Embargo to Be Fully Lifted, Obama Says in Hanoi," *New York Times*, May 23, 2016. For an analysis of Vietnam's human rights situation at the time, see Human Rights Watch, "Vietnam: Events of 2015," in *World Report 2016*, New York, 2016. For a current assessment, see Human Rights Watch, "Vietnam: Events of 2018," in *World Report 2018*, New York, 2018.

¹⁶² White House, "Joint Statement for Enhancing the Comprehensive Partnership Between the United States of America and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam," press release, May 31, 2017.

¹⁶³ MND, 2019.

¹⁶⁴ Indian Ministry of External Affairs, "India-Vietnam Joint Statement During State Visit of President of Vietnam to India," March 3, 2018.

UNCLOS [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea] sets out the legal framework within which all activities in the oceans and seas must be carried out.”¹⁶⁵

Unofficially, there also seems to be support for the Indo-Pacific Strategy. The former vice minister of foreign affairs and ambassador to the United States, Pham Quang Vinh, affirmed in August 2018 that “the Free and Open Indo-Pacific initiative is inclusive, not just about economics.” He went on to explain that, first, “it includes political and security space expanded to enhance cooperation among countries. Second, it also guarantees a security environment including freedom of navigation. Third, it promotes economic links among nations. . . . We should actively participate in initiatives coinciding with the interests of regional countries, enhancing cooperation and guaranteeing security as well as an environment for development, respecting existing institutions, especially the centrality of ASEAN.”¹⁶⁶ Sr. Col. Le Duc Cuong of the MND’s Department of Foreign Relations assesses that the Indo-Pacific Strategy aims at “preserving the U.S. economic benefits and political, military, diplomatic power, and containing the countries threatening the U.S. position, especially China and Russia.” The strategy will “turn this region into a new playground for fair, free, and open competition which is not completely dependent on China’s BRI” and “create more motivations and resources for strengthening regional countries’ defense and security potential.”¹⁶⁷

Vietnam’s Defense Relations with the United States Growing, but Within Limits

Washington’s defense relationship is growing because of Hanoi’s rising perception of the Chinese threat in the SCS. Defense policy dialogues commenced in August 2010, and the two sides signed an MoU in 2011 that covered information sharing in the conduct of noncombat military operations, such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), SAR, and PKO. As part of President Obama’s meeting in July 2015 with Vietnamese General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong at the White House, the two sides adopted a joint vision statement that included plans for a program of U.S. assistance designed to improve Hanoi’s MDA capabilities.¹⁶⁸ Subsequently, in May 2016, Obama visited Vietnam and lifted the decades-long embargo on arms sales to Vietnam.

In August 2017, Vietnamese Defense Minister Lich visited the Pentagon in what quietly appears to have been the largest VPA delegation to ever have made the journey for one-on-one meetings with U.S. counterparts. During the talks, the two sides hammered out plans for the first U.S. aircraft carrier to dock in Vietnam since the end of the Vietnam War—a remarkable show of strength in U.S.-Vietnam defense ties, particularly for Hanoi and its usual low-key

¹⁶⁵ Linh Pham, “Vietnam Welcomes US Stance on South China Sea,” *Hanoi Times*, July 16, 2020.

¹⁶⁶ Tra My and Ngoc Ha, “Sáng kiến Ấn Độ-Thái Bình Dương mở rộng không gian chính trị” [“The Indo-Pacific Initiative Enlarges the Political Sphere”], *Zing*, March 13, 2018.

¹⁶⁷ Le Duc Cuong, “On the US Indo-Pacific Strategy,” *National Defence Journal*, July 1, 2018.

¹⁶⁸ White House, “United States-Vietnam Joint Vision Statement,” press release, July 7, 2015.

approach.¹⁶⁹ In January 2018, then–Secretary of Defense James Mattis made a reciprocal visit to Hanoi and referred to the United States and Vietnam as “like-minded partners” on ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific region.¹⁷⁰ Then, in March 2018, Washington and Hanoi made good on the carrier visit, with the USS *Carl Vinson* docking at Da Nang Port.¹⁷¹ In June 2018, just before the Shangri-La Dialogue, Mattis met with Vietnamese interlocutors. This was his first foreign engagement of the event, once again underscoring the rapidly deepening defense ties between the United States and Vietnam.¹⁷²

After canceling his trip to China amid spiraling bilateral relations, Mattis in October 2018 decided to visit Vietnam instead.¹⁷³ While on the ground, Mattis sought to diversify defense relations beyond mutual concerns over the SCS by touring Bien Hoa Air Base—one of the many sites in Vietnam that has been contaminated with Agent Orange. Mattis’s trip, and the largest-ever U.S. cleanup program that followed in early 2019, helps further build trust between the one-time adversaries.¹⁷⁴ Two visits in a year to Vietnam by the Secretary of Defense is truly remarkable in that it demonstrates just how important Washington believes that Hanoi is as a like-minded partner in countering Beijing’s assertiveness in the SCS. In April 2019, the commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral Philip Davidson, visited Vietnam for the first time.¹⁷⁵ Then, in November 2019, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper visited Vietnam and highlighted the growing strength of U.S.-Vietnam security ties. He also announced the transfer of a second *Hamilton*-class coast guard cutter to the VCG.¹⁷⁶ Several months later, in March 2020, Washington sent a second aircraft carrier, the USS *Theodore Roosevelt*, to Da Nang Port—marking two aircraft carrier visits in three years.¹⁷⁷ Finally, Vietnam was invited to, and participated in, the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercises in the summer of 2020, which followed its first-time participation in the 2018 iteration.

¹⁶⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, “Readout of Secretary Mattis’ Meeting with Vietnamese Minister of National Defense Lich,” August 9, 2017.

¹⁷⁰ Ferdinando, 2018.

¹⁷¹ Minh Nguyen, “U.S. Carrier Arrives in Vietnam Amid Rising Chinese Influence in the Region,” Reuters, March 4, 2018.

¹⁷² U.S. Department of Defense, 2017.

¹⁷³ Amanda Macias, “Defense Secretary Jim Mattis Cancels Trip to China as Trade Tensions Worsen,” CNBC, October 1, 2018; U.S. Department of Defense, “Secretary Mattis Travels to Vietnam, Singapore,” October 12, 2018a; U.S. Department of Defense, *Assessment on U.S. Defense Implications of China’s Expanding Global Access*, Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 6-6B48CD8, December 20, 2018b.

¹⁷⁴ Phil Stewart, “U.S. Prepares for Biggest-Ever Agent Orange Cleanup in Vietnam,” Reuters, October 17, 2018; U.S. Agency for International Development, “Environmental Remediation,” webpage, updated August 12, 2019.

¹⁷⁵ U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Vietnam “U.S. Indo-Pacific Commander Davidson Makes Inaugural Visit to Vietnam,” April 19, 2019a.

¹⁷⁶ U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Vietnam, “U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper Visits Vietnam, Highlighting a Strong U.S.-Vietnam Partnership,” November 21, 2019b.

¹⁷⁷ Wyatt Olson, “USS Theodore Roosevelt Arrives in Vietnam, Becoming Second U.S. Carrier to Visit Since 1970s,” *Stars and Stripes*, March 4, 2020.

To be sure, despite signs of significant progress in U.S.-Vietnam defense ties, enormous hurdles remain. Most notably, many VCP and VPA officers (especially those who have retired but still maintain influence in the system) continue to show lingering suspicions of U.S. intentions stemming from the Vietnam War era. Hanoi also worries about the potential for the United States—or the West more broadly—to foment social unrest in Vietnam to create the conditions for a “peaceful evolution” to democracy. The VPA thus remains highly secretive about its doctrine, training, capabilities, and many other details of its operations, which inherently places limitations on Vietnamese receptivity to U.S. overtures. Moreover, Vietnam is constantly concerned with properly calibrating relationships between major-power relationships—most recently between the United States and China. Indeed, one of the potential explanations for why Vietnam canceled (or possibly postponed) 15 U.S.-Vietnam defense engagements in 2019 is that it wanted to avoid unnecessarily irritating Beijing.¹⁷⁸ And the Three No’s defense policy inherently limits Vietnamese participation in security cooperation with external powers.

And, yet, Hanoi has made great strides with Washington. In addition to the many symbolic engagements, such as the carrier visits and senior-level dialogues, the United States has also worked with Vietnam to enhance the VPA’s MDA capabilities to better track Chinese activities and its own activities in the SCS. Another fruitful area has been in bolstering VCG capabilities, demonstrated by Washington’s transfer of a *Hamilton*-class cutter and promise of a second, as well as deliveries from the Metal Shark company that demonstrate deepening coast guard collaboration and U.S. assistance in the construction of coast guard facilities in Vietnam. The final area is in HA/DR, in which many nonlethal forms of joint training can also be applied toward enhancing the conduct of joint operations.

Overall, Vietnam’s perspective on deepening defense cooperation with the United States is positive. As mentioned earlier, Hanoi in 2011 officially floated the prospect of raising bilateral relations to the strategic level. However, concerns surrounding Beijing’s likely response seem to have limited such aspirations. Either way, Hanoi will quietly, and publicly if its national interests are severely challenged, continue to support U.S. policy objectives under the Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy. For example, in response to the U.S. schedule of freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), Hanoi in September 2017 asserted that “Vietnam respects the rights of every nation to conduct its rights to freedom of navigation and overflight in accordance with international law.”¹⁷⁹ As recently as February 2019, Hanoi stated that “Vietnam reiterates respect to freedom of maritime navigation as U.S. warships sail past the Spratlys.”¹⁸⁰ In January 2019, Vietnam did not oppose a naval drill from the United States and the United

¹⁷⁸ Hong Hiep Le, “Why Did Vietnam Cancel Its Defence Engagements with the U.S.?” ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, December 11, 2018.

¹⁷⁹ Thai An, “Vietnam Comments on US Schedule of FONOPs in the SCS,” *Vietnamnet*, September 7, 2017.

¹⁸⁰ Linh Pham, “Vietnam Reiterates Respect for Freedom of Maritime Navigation as U.S. Warships Past [*sic*] by Spratlys,” *Hanoi Times*, February 16, 2019.

Kingdom in the SCS or U.S. FONOPs in the Paracels.¹⁸¹ In an uncharacteristically direct fashion, Vice Defense Minister Vinh in 2016 “affirmed that Vietnam will support the U.S. and other partners to intervene in the region as long as it brings peace, stability, and prosperity.”¹⁸² During his meeting in January 2018 with Secretary Mattis, Vietnamese Defense Minister Lich stated that priorities for the relationship will be to address war legacies, build maritime law enforcement, cooperate on military health, train the VPA in English, and explore each side’s demands and capacity for defense industrial cooperation.¹⁸³

According to Nguyen Vu Tung, the president of the DAV, the visit indicates that bilateral ties have become more substantive: “Those are the development steps in the established ‘relationship framework,’ such as high-level visits and deepening ties.”¹⁸⁴ Indeed, there is great enthusiasm for U.S.-Vietnam defense exchanges to widen and deepen. For instance, Ha Hoang Hop, a Vietnamese Singapore-based observer, noted that “the two visits of U.S. aircraft carriers, one last year and the other upcoming in September [2019, although this one did not occur and was postponed until March 2020], take on great significance, upgrading bilateral defense relations into a broader and more comprehensive level.”¹⁸⁵ At least one Vietnamese commentator has gone much further in the direction of strengthening the U.S.-Vietnam defense partnership, suggesting that Hanoi’s defense diplomacy with others has all but failed to prevent China from militarizing the SCS. According to Pham Chi Dung, an independent journalist and ex-military officer, Vietnam’s “multilateral diplomacy” and a dozen “strategic partnerships” have not defended the country against increased aggressive activities by China, especially during the 2014 oil rig incident and as exhibited by Vietnam’s forced suspension of oil exploration in 2017. This has forced Vietnam to approach a “strategic partnership” with the United States, which is the “only counterweight to China that Vietnam has to rely on.”¹⁸⁶ And, yet, there is still a measure of caution. According to Nguyen Thanh Trung, the director of the Center for International Studies at Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City, “Vietnam does not want to speed up in its defense relations with the U.S. due to its principle of balancing ties with the U.S. and China.”¹⁸⁷

¹⁸¹ Vu Anh, “Freedom of Navigation a Joint Responsibility of All Nations: Vietnam,” VnExpress, January 25, 2019.

¹⁸² My Pham, “Vietnam Gives Thumbs-Up to U.S. Regional Role as Pivot Stumbles,” Reuters, October 18, 2016a.

¹⁸³ “Việt Nam, Hoa Kỳ thúc đẩy quan hệ quốc phòng” [“Vietnam and the United States Enhance Defense Ties”], *Chinh Phu [Government]*, January 26, 2018.

¹⁸⁴ Canh Toan, “Đi châu Á, Bộ trưởng Quốc phòng Mỹ ưu tiên chọn Việt Nam, Indonesia” [“Traveling to Asia, U.S. Defense Secretary Selects Vietnam and Indonesia”], *Zing*, January 22, 2018.

¹⁸⁵ Hoa Ai, “Vietnam Should Be Wary of China While Promoting Defense Ties with the US,” RFA, April 18, 2019.

¹⁸⁶ Pham Chi Dung, “‘Đôi tác chiến lược Mỹ-Việt’ sắp thành hình?” [“An Upcoming Vietnam-US Strategic Partnership?”], *VOA Vietnamese*, April 6, 2019.

¹⁸⁷ Ai, 2019.

U.S. and Allies Critical to Vietnam's Continued Economic Growth

Although China is Vietnam's most important economic partner, the United States is very likely second most important because of its ability to help Hanoi avoid overdependence on Beijing and to maintain the careful balance between major powers in its foreign policy. To be sure, the United States by the numbers might not actually be second for Vietnam. For example, the United States is actually behind South Korea in terms of trade; the United States is Vietnam's third-largest trading partner and Japan, as the world's third-largest economy, is the top ODA provider to Vietnam as of 2019. But assessing Washington's impact strictly based on statistics does not adequately take into account the formidable, even if mostly symbolic, role that economic interactions with the United States play in supporting Vietnam's strategic interests.

It is precisely for this reason that the Trump administration's decision in 2017 to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was so deflating for Vietnam (and the entire region). Hanoi had to significantly reform and liberalize its economic system to become eligible to join the TPP. Washington's noticeable absence in the signature trade group of the Pacific, coupled with Trump's touting of a more isolationist "America First" economic policy involving the raising of tariff barriers, strongly suggested to Vietnam that U.S. sustainability in the region was, at best, questionable.¹⁸⁸

Nevertheless, Vietnam signed up to become a member of the TPP without the United States, known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP, or TPP-11) and thus continues to maintain close and mutually favorable trading ties with key U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific, including Australia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, and Singapore. Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh summed it up best: "Vietnam braved the headwinds of protectionism to further deepen its international economic integration. Vietnam signed the CPTPP with ten other economies and was one of the seven countries that ratified the world's first new generation free trade agreement in the world, thereby asserting the role of a 'link' in important regional economic linkage."¹⁸⁹ Outside the Indo-Pacific, Vietnam in June 2019 inked an FTA with the European Union, known as the European Union–Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA). EVFTA went into effect in August 2020, and it should help Hanoi further diversify its trade relationships and therefore dampen the impact that overreliance on Beijing has on its economic health.¹⁹⁰

Conclusion

Vietnam prioritizes maintaining productive and cordial relations with China, while incrementally cultivating ties with the United States and other key partners, including ASEAN,

¹⁸⁸ RAND interviews with foreign affairs expert and former officials, Hanoi, April 2019.

¹⁸⁹ Pham Binh Minh, "External Relations in 2018: Proactive, Creative and Effective," *Communist Review*, March 25, 2019.

¹⁹⁰ Khanh Vu and Phuong Nguyen, "Vietnam, EU Sign Landmark Free Trade Deal," Reuters, June 30, 2019.

India, Japan, Australia, and Russia (for more, see Chapter 5), to balance Beijing's excesses in the security and economic domains. Hanoi appears to be on board with the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy and will likely seek to deepen cooperation with Washington as Vietnamese concerns grow over Chinese behavior in the SCS and via BRI.

5. Vietnam's Partners Beyond China and the United States

The nature of Vietnam's security relationships with other countries, both in the region and beyond, is in part reflective of how Vietnam perceives its ties to the United States and China, and thus is worth spending some time to discuss here. Vietnam's security policy is derived from VCP resolutions—specifically Resolution 13 (1988) and Resolution 8 (2003)—passed and implemented following the watershed decision in 1986 to reform and open up Vietnam, known as *Đổi Mới*. Resolution 13 calls for Vietnam to “make more friends, fewer enemies,” while Resolution 8 requires that Vietnam “cooperate and struggle” against both friends and adversaries alike. These are key building blocks in the formulation of Vietnamese defense policy and overall foreign policy, as Hanoi over the past 25 years has prioritized forging robust defense relationships—beyond the socialist and former socialist bloc countries—to counter trends inimical to its national interests.

The result has been a proliferation of Vietnam's security relations both regionally and globally. According to the last official numbers available, which were provided by the MND in the 2019 defense white paper, Vietnam has established defense relationships “with over 80 countries and international organizations [and] has set up defense attaché offices in 37 countries and to the United Nations in 2019.” Hanoi is also hosting 49 defense attaché offices from foreign countries in Vietnam.¹⁹¹ A Vietnamese interlocutor interviewed in 2017 likened the rising number of Hanoi's defense relationships to an old Vietnamese saying: “One stick is easy to break, but many sticks are hard to break.”¹⁹² Within the context of the “new situation” with China in the SCS, the saying has particular resonance as Vietnam attempts to complicate future Chinese actions by enlisting the support of external partners.

However, living next door to China—which dwarfs Vietnam in terms of economic and military power—has significantly tempered Hanoi's vigor in struggling against Beijing. As mentioned, China itself is a comprehensive strategic cooperative partner to Vietnam, the highest level of partnership with major powers (see Table 5.1). Bestowing such a distinction on China underscores the intense amount of care Vietnam takes to avoid upsetting China, even if actual defense and security ties are quite circumscribed. In addition, Vietnam's Three No's defense policy (no military alliances, no foreign bases on Vietnamese soil, and no activities with one country against another), first unveiled in the MND's defense white paper in 1998, is actually

¹⁹¹ MND, 2019. Also, in its review of Vietnam's progress on international integration to date, the VCP at the 12th Party Congress in January 2016 noted that Hanoi had to do more on forging bilateral relationships, including in the area of defense. This is an important indicator of Vietnam's intent to continue pushing forward with defense cooperation. For more, see “Chiến lược tổng thể hội nhập quốc tế đến năm 2020, tầm nhìn 2030” [“Overall Strategy for International Integration to 2020, Vision to 2030”], *Vietnam Plus*, January 9, 2016.

¹⁹² RAND interview with Vietnamese think tank expert, Hanoi, August 2017.

directly meant to avoid offending China. Multiple Vietnamese interlocutors indicated that Vietnam is self-imposing redlines on its own security policy to limit potential fallout to the overall bilateral relationship.¹⁹³

Table 5.1. Hierarchy of Vietnam’s Partnerships, with Selected Examples

Level of Partnership	Select Countries	Relationship to Vietnam
Tier 1	China	Comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership
	India	Comprehensive strategic partnership
	Russia	Comprehensive strategic partnership
Tier 2	Japan	Extensive strategic partnership for peace and prosperity in Asia
	Australia	Strategic partnership
	South Korea	Strategic partnership
Tier 3	United States	Comprehensive partnership
Special tier	Cambodia	Special strategic relationship
	Laos	Special strategic relationship

NOTES: Countries are not necessarily arranged in rank order within tiers, although they do reflect my interpretation of their status. The United States is clearly operating at a higher level with Vietnam than *comprehensive partnership* might imply. According to the 2019 defense white paper (MND, 2019), Vietnam has established strategic partnerships with 16 countries (presumably including comprehensive strategic partners) and comprehensive partnerships with 11 countries. Laos and Cambodia are listed as special strategic relationships.

Nevertheless, Resolution 28 (on Vietnam’s national defense strategy) indicates that Hanoi seeks to enlist the support of major powers and balance among them. The resolution reads, in part, that Vietnam must find ways of “enhancing the cooperation to create intertwined strategic interests between [Vietnam] and others, especially large powers, strategic partners, neighbors and regional countries; avoiding conflicts, confrontation, isolation, and dependence.”¹⁹⁴ Admittedly, however, debates on how best to accomplish and refine Vietnam’s careful balancing act, especially between the United States and China, continue to this day and will probably do so for the foreseeable future.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ RAND interview with Vietnamese defense think tank expert, Hanoi, April 2019.

¹⁹⁴ Quoted in Binh, 2014.

¹⁹⁵ See, for example, Communist Party of Vietnam, “Tác động của quan hệ giữa các nước lớn đối với thế giới, khu vực và Việt Nam” [“Impacts of Relations Among Great Powers on the World, Region and Vietnam”], *Báo điện tử—Đảng cộng sản Việt Nam* [Communist Party of Vietnam Online Newspaper], September 21, 2017.

Vietnam's Other Partners Mostly Help Balance China

Association of Southeast Asian Nations

Vietnam joined ASEAN in 1995 as part of its normalization with major powers.¹⁹⁶ Hanoi has since developed and strengthened bilateral relations with all members. The most important aspect of Vietnam's participation in ASEAN, however, is the multilateral coordination that can support Hanoi's pushback against Beijing in the SCS. To date, ASEAN has agreed on a Declaration of the Conduct Parties in 2002, which, though nonbinding, sets the tone of discussion on appropriate regional behavior. For years, Vietnam, in concert with the Philippines (prior to the 2016 election of Rodrigo Duterte), had been attempting to advance this discussion to establish a binding CoC. According to leaked details of the negotiations, Hanoi demands that the final CoC include prohibitions on further artificial island building, the deployment of offensive weapons (such as missiles), and a declaration of an air defense identification zone over most of the SCS, which has long been rumored.¹⁹⁷

Thus far, Vietnam's efforts have not yielded such an agreement because of China's intransigence and sustained opposition from China-dependent ASEAN countries, such as Cambodia and Laos, and from states with no interest in supporting Vietnam in the region, such as Burma and Thailand. However, Vietnam's assumption of the rotating ASEAN chairmanship in 2020 gave Hanoi its best opportunity yet to influence the course of ASEAN discussions on the CoC and the need for China to respect international law and norms of behavior in the region. Unfortunately, these negotiations thus far have been overshadowed by ASEAN coordination to address the coronavirus pandemic.

Hanoi probably worries that Washington's Indo-Pacific Strategy may offer too binary of a choice between the United States and China for ASEAN's taste. For example, according to Tran Viet Thai of the DAV, the strategy is affecting "the region and the world, including the ASEAN member states, bringing opportunities and posing challenges to the region." Thai goes on to observe that, "on the one hand, ASEAN must stay alert to avoid being stuck with major powers and to deal with the issue of selecting one side. On the other hand, ASEAN must remain vigilant against major powers' compromise made behind the ASEAN member states." Regardless, Thai states, the United States is likely to "support and aid ASEAN's central role in the Indo-Pacific Strategy while continuing to participate in the region's mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), the East Asia Summit (EAS), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), as well as mechanisms for ASEAN+3 and ASEAN+4."¹⁹⁸ Indeed, during Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's February 2019

¹⁹⁶ This section is largely derived from my research published in Harold et al., 2019.

¹⁹⁷ Greg Torode, "Tough SCS Talks Ahead as Vietnam Seeks to Curb China's Actions," Reuters, December 30, 2018.

¹⁹⁸ Tran Viet Thai, "ASEAN and the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy," *National Defense Journal*, December 13, 2018.

visit to Hanoi, his Vietnamese counterpart, Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh, urged the United States to continue its support for the centrality and solidarity of ASEAN and for promoting the ASEAN-U.S. strategic partnership.¹⁹⁹

India

Vietnam and India share a 2,000-year history of interaction, cultural exchange, and political cooperation, as well as sympathy for anticolonialism and the need to balance between great powers throughout the Cold War. The two sides share deep and abiding concerns over the geostrategic implications of China's growing economic and military power, with Vietnamese interlocutors explaining in 2017 that India, no longer Russia, was at that point Vietnam's "most reliable" defense partner.²⁰⁰ In September 2016, for example, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Hanoi and highlighted Vietnam as critical to India's Act East policy to secure its strategic interests in the region. During the same visit, Vietnam and India elevated their relationship to that of a comprehensive strategic partnership. In March 2018, then-Vietnamese president Tran Dai Quang visited India and in a joint statement with Modi pledged to continue deepening defense and security cooperation in many areas.²⁰¹ Most recently, in November 2018, Indian President Ram Nath Kovind visited Vietnam to discuss the overall state of bilateral relations. Kovind said that Vietnam was pivotal to India's Act East policy and that "Vietnam and India share a vision for the Indo-Pacific region, of which the SCS is a critical component."²⁰²

Vietnam's defense cooperation with India spans many different areas. In 2007, the two signed the Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership that arranged for strategic dialogue at the vice-ministerial level, joint training, intelligence exchanges, and technical assistance. It also specified cooperation on joint projects, procurement of defense supplies, and information sharing on maritime security, antipiracy, counterterrorism, and cyber security.²⁰³ In 2009, Hanoi and New Delhi signed an MoU that authorized an annual strategic dialogue and high-level defense exchanges, and, in 2014, the Modi government pledged to provide four patrol vessels to Vietnam during the Vietnamese defense minister's visit, along with an MoU on enhanced coast guard cooperation.²⁰⁴ On Kovind's second visit to New Delhi, in May 2015, Vietnam and India signed

¹⁹⁹ Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Hội đàm giữa Phó Thủ tướng, Bộ trưởng Ngoại giao Phạm Bình Minh với Ngoại trưởng Hoa Kỳ Mai-cơn Pom-pê-ô (Michael Pompeo)" ["Meeting Between DPM, Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh with US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo"], February 28, 2019a.

²⁰⁰ RAND interview with Vietnamese think tank expert, Hanoi, August 2017 (for a previous project). For a good analysis of India-Vietnam relations, see Jonah Blank, Jennifer D.P. Moroney, Angel Rabasa, and Bonny Lin, *Looking East, Cross Black Waters: India's Interest in Southeast Asia*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1021-AF, 2015.

²⁰¹ Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2018.

²⁰² "Vietnam Pivotal to Act East Policy, Says President Ram Nath Kovind," *Hindustan Times*, November 21, 2018.

²⁰³ As detailed in Thayer, 2016a.

²⁰⁴ Ankit Panda, "India and Vietnam Push Ahead with Strategic Security Cooperation," *The Diplomat*, May 26, 2015.

the Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations and Defense Cooperation, which included an annual security dialogue, service-to-service exchanges, professional military education, port visits, ship construction and spare-part provision, defense coproduction, maintenance of military equipment, exercises within multilateral constructs, and cooperation in regional forums.²⁰⁵ During Modi's visit to Hanoi in September 2016, he announced a \$500 million line of credit for Vietnam to purchase defense equipment from India.²⁰⁶

In March 2018, Quang visited India and, in a joint statement with Modi, pledged to continue deepening defense and security cooperation in many areas, including the implementation of an additional \$100 million for the procurement of high-speed patrol boats for Vietnam's Border Guards, capacity building in both the traditional and nontraditional spheres, and cooperation in the MDA.²⁰⁷ Most recently, in November 2018, Kovind visited Vietnam and raised New Delhi's \$100 million credit package to Hanoi to build high-speed patrol boats. Kovind also reiterated New Delhi's commitment to further deepening bilateral defense and security cooperation, particularly through joint training opportunities.²⁰⁸ In August 2018, Vietnamese Deputy Defense Minister Vinh visited India to meet with counterparts and, while there, participated in the 11th annual defense policy dialogue.²⁰⁹ Bilateral military service-to-service exchanges are also a means to remain particularly close.²¹⁰ Hanoi likely benefits significantly from outside expertise, given its near-exclusive focus on land-centric warfare throughout its history.²¹¹ New Delhi has also offered submarine training using Vietnam's *Kilo*-class submarines, pilot training for the Su-27 Flanker and Su-30, and even ground-force training—underscoring the special and intimate nature of their cooperation.²¹²

Vietnam and India might have quietly held a joint naval exercise in June 2013 that angered China, although few details are available.²¹³ Regardless, this alleged event has been overshadowed by India and Vietnam's very public decision to conduct joint naval exercises in May 2018 in the SCS.²¹⁴ Then, in June and September 2018, India sent warships to Da Nang and

²⁰⁵ As detailed in Thayer, 2016a.

²⁰⁶ "Vietnam, India Upgrade Ties to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," *Saigon Times*, September 6, 2016.

²⁰⁷ Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2018.

²⁰⁸ "Vietnam Pivotal to Act East Policy, Says President Ram Nath Kovind," 2018.

²⁰⁹ Prashanth Parameswaran, "What's Next for Vietnam-India Defense Relations?" *The Diplomat*, August 3, 2018.

²¹⁰ Relations between the two countries' navies and air forces are particularly close. For more, see Vu Tien Trong, "Vietnam-India Strategic Partnership in the Fields of Defence and Security," *National Defence Journal*, August 29, 2017.

²¹¹ For more, see Grossman, 2018a.

²¹² See, for example, Vishnu Som, "As China Arms Pakistan, India Trains Vietnamese Soldiers in Jungle Warfare," NDTV, March 16, 2016.

²¹³ Rahul Mishra, "India-Vietnam: New Waves of Strategic Engagement," Indian Council on World Affairs, January 20, 2014.

²¹⁴ Abhishek Mohanty, "India-Vietnam Defense Ties in Spotlight with Joint Naval Exercise," *Asia Times*, May 29, 2018.

Ho Chi Minh City, respectively, on port visits.²¹⁵ Later, in December 2018, the VPA Navy's chief, Vice Admiral Pham Hoai Nam, visited his counterparts in India to discuss training and technical maintenance issues and to observe Indian warships and submarines in Mumbai.²¹⁶ And in October 2018, for the first time ever, a VCG vessel visited India. While there, the vessel conducted a joint exercise with India off the Chennai coast to practice maritime safety, SAR, and law enforcement tactics.²¹⁷ In April 2019, the Indian Coast Guard returned the favor by sending a vessel to make a port call at Da Nang.²¹⁸

With respect to arms procurement, New Delhi is a particularly valuable partner for Hanoi because its military inventory is composed, to a large extent, of Soviet-era weapon systems, similar to the majority of VPA systems, thereby reducing concerns about maintenance and interoperability. India also is increasingly building indigenous systems that might be of interest to Vietnam. It is difficult, however, to identify concrete examples of weapon sales other than systems that have been pledged for the future, such as the four patrol boats in 2014. When a report surfaced in the Indian media in August 2017 that Vietnam had, after years of negotiation, finally secured BrahMos supersonic antiship cruise missiles from India, New Delhi quickly denied the report.²¹⁹ When asked about the deal, Hanoi sidestepped a direct response but pointed out that defense procurement "is consistent with the policy of peace and self-defense and is the normal practice in the national defense," suggesting it would welcome such a sale even if it angered Beijing.²²⁰

Russia

Russia (especially in its previous incarnation as the Soviet Union) has historically served as Vietnam's most important defense partner. However, this is changing, with some Vietnamese observers characterizing India as Vietnam's "most reliable" defense partner today.²²¹ During the Cold War, the Soviet Union supported North Vietnam's efforts to defeat the French and the United States, conquer the south, and even resist Chinese coercion post-1978.²²² In March 2001, Moscow and Hanoi signed a strategic partnership agreement, and then in July 2012 upgraded

²¹⁵ Prashanth Parameswaran, "Destroyer Visit Highlights India-Vietnam Naval Ties," *The Diplomat*, September 29, 2018c.

²¹⁶ Prashanth Parameswaran, "Navy Chief Highlights India-Vietnam Military Relations," *The Diplomat*, December 13, 2018e.

²¹⁷ Prashanth Parameswaran, "India-Vietnam Coast Guard Ties in the Spotlight with First Visit," *The Diplomat*, October 6, 2018d.

²¹⁸ "Indian Patrol Vessel's Vietnam Visit Enhances Defence, Maritime Ties," *Economic Times*, April 2, 2019.

²¹⁹ Vishnu Som, "In a Move That Will Anger China, Vietnam Says Yes, India Denies," NDTV, August 18, 2017.

²²⁰ Khanh Lynh, "Vietnam Hails Burgeoning Defense Ties with India," *VNExpress*, August 18, 2017.

²²¹ Previous RAND interview with Vietnamese think tank expert, Hanoi, August 2017.

²²² See, for example, details about Soviet assistance to North Vietnam following the Sino-Soviet split in Nicholas Khoo, "Breaking the Ring of Encirclement: The Sino-Soviet Rift and Chinese Policy Toward Vietnam," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, Winter 2010.

their relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership. Vietnam procures approximately 80 percent of its military systems from Russia (though the VPA is diversifying suppliers in recent years), enabling Hanoi to modernize the VPA for combat in the air and naval domains. Notable systems include dozens of Su-30MK2 maritime strike aircraft, four *Gepard*-class frigates, six *Kilo*-class submarines, and a range of different air defense missile systems, among other platforms.²²³ Russia has also historically provided training for VPA officers in Moscow and maintenance and repair services for Soviet or Russian systems.

Although Vietnam's defense relationship with Russia predates Hanoi's growing concerns over Chinese coercion in the SCS, it nevertheless complicates Beijing's plans there. Beyond Russian-supplied military equipment that furthers VPA modernization, Moscow also supports freedom of navigation in broad terms. This, coupled with bilateral friction between Moscow and Beijing in certain areas of their relationship, could one day result in Russian support for Vietnam's strategic interests in the region. It is important to note, however, that Hanoi does not appear to have publicly sought such support from Russia to date.

Japan

Vietnam and Japan maintain an *extensive strategic partnership for peace and prosperity in Asia*, which, according to former senior Vietnamese officials specializing in Japan and Northeast Asia, means that there is “a profound and deep partnership” between the two.²²⁴ Relations had been particularly positive under Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's leadership—and now under Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide's. Hanoi benefits significantly from Tokyo's willingness to stand up to Beijing on territorial disputes, whether in the East China Sea or the SCS, as well as Tokyo's advocacy of peaceful settlement of disputes based on international law and freedom of navigation and overflight. Tokyo's own grievances with Beijing make it an ideal partner for Hanoi.

Both sides reaffirmed their “extensive collaboration and coordination” in regional forums during Vietnamese Prime Minister Phuc's visit to Tokyo in June 2017.²²⁵ To celebrate the 45th anniversary of the establishment of Vietnam-Japan diplomatic relations, Vietnamese President Quang in May 2018 made a historic five-day visit to Japan and not only met with Abe but was hosted at a state banquet by then-Emperor Akihito—the highest honor that can be accorded to a visitor. Although Quang's meetings focused on the overall bilateral relationship, he and Abe called out the need to continue working together on ensuring maritime safety in the SCS.²²⁶ After Abe stepped down and Suga became prime minister in September 2020, Suga decided to make

²²³ Zachary Abuza and Nguyen Nhat Anh, “Vietnam's Military Modernization,” *The Diplomat*, October 28, 2016.

²²⁴ Previous RAND interview with former Vietnamese officials, Hanoi, August 2017.

²²⁵ “Vietnam, Japan Issue Joint Statement on Deepening Partnership,” *Nhan Dan*, June 7, 2017.

²²⁶ Associated Press “Japan, Vietnam Agree on Maritime Safety Cooperation,” *Asahi Shimbun*, June 1, 2018.

Vietnam his first overseas visit in October, and he inked an arms sales agreement with Prime Minister Phuc.

To be sure, the relationship is not based solely on shared opposition to China's coercive approach to dealing with territorial and maritime disputes; Japan is the largest contributor of ODA to Vietnam, ensuring that people-to-people ties are warm and deep. In February 2017, Akihito and Empress Michiko visited Vietnam for the first time ever on a well-received tour to apologize for the actions of Japanese soldiers during World War II—another sign that the relationship, though historically complex, is in excellent health.²²⁷

Vietnam-Japan defense ties are premised on a series of official statements, beginning with an MoU signed in 2011 that directed the establishment of reciprocal defense attaché offices and the commencement of the annual Defense Policy Dialogue. Vietnam and Japan followed up on the MoU with a joint vision statement in September 2015 that codified cooperation on nontraditional security issues, such as maritime security, SAR, and PKO.²²⁸ Other areas of defense cooperation are military aviation, air defense, submarine rescue, personnel training, counterterrorism, maritime salvage, information technology training, cybersecurity, military medicine, HA/DR, human resources development, antipiracy, unexploded ordnance removal, dioxin contamination removal, and training in how to comply with the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea.²²⁹ Most recently, in March 2019, the Vietnamese deputy defense minister, Senior Lieutenant General Phan Van Giang, visited Japan to meet with military counterparts, including the Japanese defense minister. All leaders reiterated the importance of deepening bilateral defense cooperation.²³⁰

Vietnam and Japan have also conducted coordinated training. In an unprecedented move, Japan in June 2017 sent a Japan Coast Guard patrol ship to Da Nang to engage in joint exercises aimed at combating illegal fishing. Japan in May 2017 sent its JS Izumo helicopter flattop destroyer to Cam Ranh International Port, which paved the way for the U.S. carrier visit in March 2018. In September 2018, Hanoi followed up on deepening maritime cooperation with Tokyo by allowing a Japanese submarine to make a first-ever port call to Cam Ranh International Port, possibly opening the door to other countries to make such a visit in the future.²³¹ Vietnamese Defense Minister Lich might have been given the unique opportunity to

²²⁷ My Pham, "Japanese Emperor Meets Former Soldiers' Families in Vietnam," Reuters, March 2, 2017.

²²⁸ Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Vision Statement on Japan-Viet Nam Relations," 2015.

²²⁹ Compiled from Thayer, 2016a; Hong Hiep Le, *The Strategic Significance of Vietnam-Japan Ties*, Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Institute, April 11, 2017b; "Vietnam, Japan Defence Cooperation to Grow Further," *Voice of Vietnam*, June 6, 2017; and an undated Japanese government document titled "Japan-Vietnam Defense Cooperation and Exchanges," provided by a Japanese interlocutor in August 2017.

²³⁰ Le Xuan Duc, "High-Ranking Vietnamese Military Delegation Pays Official Visit to Japan," *People's Army Newspaper*, March 5, 2019.

²³¹ Prashanth Parameswaran, "Why Japan's First Submarine Visit to Vietnam Matters," *The Diplomat*, September 19, 2018b.

board the Japanese submarine during the port call, further building trust.²³² Shortly thereafter, Vietnam made a return frigate visit to Japan in a sign of strengthening maritime security ties.²³³ Japanese training ships also made a port call at Da Nang in March 2019.²³⁴

Japan has assisted Vietnam in building the capacity of its maritime law enforcement capabilities in two other key areas. First, Tokyo, in August 2014, announced that it would send six used patrol boats to Vietnam. The timing of this announcement was significant as it occurred only days after the end of Vietnam's maritime standoff with China over the oil rig.²³⁵ Then, in January 2017, Prime Minister Abe offered an additional six new patrol boats to be delivered to Hanoi. Second, Tokyo is assisting Hanoi in building up its MDA capabilities. On the higher end of the technological spectrum, Vietnam has purchased the Japanese-built ASNARO-2 satellite, an earth observation satellite that takes pictures in all weather and at any time. Vietnamese media claim that the satellite offers the highest quality of resolution available.²³⁶ Vietnam also allowed India to set up a satellite imaging and tracking center on its soil, and, in exchange, it receives access to images covering the region taken by Indian satellites. This gives Vietnam a much-needed capability to observe regional activities and locations of interest.²³⁷ By leveraging Japan's technological expertise, Vietnam is set to launch new satellites that will help it monitor SCS activities more precisely.²³⁸ Separately, there were rumors in 2016 that Vietnam was interested in purchasing used P3-C maritime surveillance aircraft from Japan, although it is unclear where these discussions stand today.²³⁹

Australia

Australia is an increasingly important partner for Vietnam, as the two countries raised the level of their partnership from *comprehensive* to *strategic* in March 2018.²⁴⁰ Hanoi and Canberra completed their sixth annual Foreign Affairs and Defense Strategic Dialogue, at which both sides reiterated their intent to boost defense cooperation and to uphold freedom of navigation in the spirit of the UNCLOS.²⁴¹ They also agreed to continue working closely within multilateral organizations, such as ASEAN—Australia held dialogue partner status and hosted a Special

²³² RAND interview with a Japanese interlocutor, Hanoi, April 2019.

²³³ Vu Anh, "Vietnamese Frigate on Long Naval Journey Docks in Japan," *VNExpress International*, September 28, 2018.

²³⁴ "Japan, Vietnam Boosting Exchanges over Defense," *Nippon*, March 6, 2019.

²³⁵ H. H. Le, 2017b.

²³⁶ "Japan to Export Earth Observation Satellite to Vietnam," *Voice of Vietnam*, September 20, 2016.

²³⁷ Sanjeev Miglani and Greg Torode, "India to Build Satellite Tracking Station in Vietnam That Offers Eye on China," Reuters, January 25, 2016.

²³⁸ Adelaida Salikha, "Vietnam to Launch Its First Satellites in 2019 and 2022," *Seasia*, September 7, 2017.

²³⁹ Atsushi Tomiyama, "Vietnam Eyes Secondhand Japanese Defense Gear," *Nikkei Asian Review*, June 26, 2016.

²⁴⁰ Carlyle A. Thayer, "Why Aren't Australia and Vietnam Strategic Partners?" *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, March 17, 2017.

²⁴¹ "Vietnam, Australia Hold Strategic Dialogue on Foreign Affairs and Defence," *Nhan Dan*, October 10, 2018.

ASEAN-Australia summit in Sydney in 2018.²⁴² Expressing mutual respect for UNCLOS is typical of past such dialogues and indeed was a prominent feature of Australia's elevation to an enhanced cooperative partner in 2015.²⁴³ Hanoi is looking to Canberra for rhetorical support of its position in the SCS. For instance, in August 2017, when Vietnamese Defense Minister Lich met with his Australian foreign minister counterpart, Marise Payne, the two sides highlighted their governments' frequent consultations at multilateral gatherings, including the ARF, ADMM, and EAS.²⁴⁴ Vietnamese leaders hope that Australian support in multilateral settings will constrain China's influence and force it to follow regional and international norms of behavior.

Vietnam engages in annual high-level defense dialogues and a range of military training activities with Australia. The VPA also benefits from the import of light weaponry from Australia, along with the blueprints for defense industrial development that serves to enhance the VPA's defense industrial output. However, there have been no joint military exercises between the two nations, no arms sales beyond light weapons, no codevelopment efforts, and no military agreements put in place. In November 2018, Vietnam and Australia signed the Joint Vision Statement on Enhancing Defense Cooperation, reaffirming the Bilateral Defense Cooperation MoU signed in 2010.²⁴⁵ The MoU called for enhanced educational training opportunities, especially in such practical areas as English-language instruction and specialist training for PKO. Another MoU, signed in 2012, called for ramping up these activities further and establishing the annual Defence Ministers' Meeting, although the group has only met twice—at its inauguration in 2013 and in 2017. Nevertheless, Hanoi and Canberra maintain annual Defence Cooperation Talks among senior officials, with the most recent occurring in October 2018, and added the 2+2 Strategic Dialogue in 2012.²⁴⁶ Hanoi and Canberra completed their sixth annual Foreign Affairs and Defense Strategic Dialogue, at which both sides reiterated their intent to boost defense cooperation and uphold freedom of navigation in the spirit of the 1982 UNCLOS.²⁴⁷

²⁴² Although not out of the ordinary for an ASEAN dialogue partner to host a special session of the ASEAN summit, Australia's hosting was probably significant for Vietnam because Canberra is like-minded on one of the key issues for discussion—the SCS. For more on the context of special ASEAN sessions, see Prashanth Parameswaran, "What's Behind the First ASEAN-Australia Special Summit?" *The Diplomat*, February 27, 2017.

²⁴³ In 2015, Vietnam and Australia released a joint statement supporting UNCLOS and stating that "both countries agree on the urgent need to conclude a code of conduct for the SCS." For more, see Vietnamese Embassy in Australia, "Vietnam and Australia Lift Relations to the Next Level," March 2015.

²⁴⁴ "Vietnam Supports Strengthened Defence Links with Australia," *Voice of Vietnam*, August 24, 2017.

²⁴⁵ Thu Trang, "Vietnam, Australia Sign Joint Vision Statement on Furthering Defense Cooperation," *People's Army Newspaper*, November 8, 2018.

²⁴⁶ Lam Anh "Vietnam, Australia Hold Second Defense Policy Dialogue," *People's Army Newspaper*, October 13, 2018. For a list of high-level defense meetings, see Vietnamese Embassy in Australia, "High Level Visits of Viet Nam to Australia," webpage, undated. Also see the joint statement on the elevation of bilateral ties, which mentions the 2+2 Strategic Dialogue: Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Joint Statement on the Establishment of a Strategic Partnership Between Australia and Vietnam," March 15, 2018.

²⁴⁷ "Vietnam, Australia Hold Strategic Dialogue on Foreign Affairs and Defence," 2018.

Vietnam and Australia conduct a wide range of military training activities. According to the description on the Australian Embassy Vietnam’s website, Canberra’s Defence Cooperation Program encompasses “long-term professional development courses and short courses for Vietnamese personnel at Defence institutions in Australia, Mobile Training Team visits to Hanoi and Laos, and individual training in Australia.”²⁴⁸ Australian training of VPA officers specifically includes English-language instruction, military medical training, counterterrorism, maritime safety, military engineer (“sapper”) training, and SAR and PKO specialist training.²⁴⁹ The MoU signed between the two sides in 2010 enabled further, more-sensitive training in the naval and special forces domains, typically centered on naval ship visits.²⁵⁰ In May 2019, Australia made Vietnam part of its regional naval engagement tour, making port calls with the HMAS *Canberra* and HMAS *Newcastle* at the Cam Ranh International Port to build goodwill.²⁵¹

South Korea

Vietnam normalized diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1992 and designated it a strategic partner in 2009. A critical element of normalization was moving on from Seoul’s participation as an ally of Washington and an adversary of Hanoi in the Vietnam War.²⁵² Yet, significantly, both sides are naturally comfortable with one another because of shared experiences in the horror of civil war and national division. Therefore, in recent years, Hanoi and Seoul have added defense cooperation to their burgeoning economic relationship. South Korea is the second largest ODA donor to Vietnam, and people-to-people ties are rapidly deepening. South Korea has also transferred two of its *Pohang*-class corvettes to Vietnam, capable of conducting antisubmarine warfare operations—a key capability for the VPA and a sign of growing trust in the defense domain.²⁵³ The growing security threat from North Korea has affected South Korea–Vietnam relations in several ways. On the one hand, the threat has brought the two countries closer together in the area of intelligence sharing. In addition, Hanoi was the site of the February 2019 summit between President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. On the other hand, North Korean provocations make it more difficult to keep Seoul’s attention on Hanoi’s interests in the SCS (to be sure, Seoul also worries about potential blowback from China if relations become too close with Vietnam).

²⁴⁸ Australian Embassy Vietnam, “Defence Cooperation Program,” webpage, undated.

²⁴⁹ “Deputy Defence Minister Meets Vice Chief of Australia’s Defence Force,” *Nhan Dan*, July 28, 2017; “Vietnam, Australia to Increase Work Exchanges, Joint Training,” *Nhan Dan*, September 8, 2014.

²⁵⁰ Australian Embassy in Vietnam, undated; Thayer, 2017.

²⁵¹ Prashanth Parameswaran, “Naval Visit Highlights Vietnam-Australia Defense Ties,” *The Diplomat*, May 14, 2019.

²⁵² Interestingly, the issue of the Vietnam War still occasionally arises. For example, in June 2017, South Korean President Moon Jae-in praised South Korean war efforts, resulting in anger from the Vietnamese side. See “South Korea Seeks to Calm Vietnam After Controversial Remarks by President,” *VNExpress*, June 14, 2017.

²⁵³ “By the End of October, Vietnam Will Have Second Pohang Class ASW Corvettes,” *War Defence News*, October 9, 2018.

Implications for Vietnam's Participation in the Quad and Trilateral Exchanges

It is noteworthy that the U.S. allies and partners, including Australia, India, and Japan, participate in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, along with the United States. The Quad was first activated in 2007 with Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, before falling apart by early 2008 because of domestic political reasons within each of the participant countries. However, starting with President Trump's trip to Asia in November 2017, the Quad was quietly resurrected. The exact purpose of the Quad is murky, and questions persist about its sustainability this time around, but the basic idea seems to be that the Quad serves as a signaling mechanism to China that like-minded democratic major powers plan to work together to preserve the liberal international order and uphold laws and norms of behavior. This is especially true in areas in which Beijing has demonstrated growing assertiveness—specifically, in the SCS.²⁵⁴

Because of the Quad's focus on maintaining a rules-based order, Vietnam would appear to have a convergence of interests with the group, given Vietnam's pushback against China's historically based claims over disputed features in the SCS. Indeed, several analysts, myself included, have considered the possibility of Vietnamese participation in the Quad, even if only as a dialogue partner.²⁵⁵ Notably, Vietnam has participated in "Quad Plus" virtual meetings in 2020, along with New Zealand and South Korea, to address the coronavirus pandemic.²⁵⁶ However, the Three No's defense policy might preclude Vietnam's participation in a Quad aimed at China, as it would likely be interpreted as violating the principle of not working with another country against a third country. It might also be construed as a military alliance (violation of policy of no military alliances), despite the Quad explicitly being a security dialogue. Moreover, as all other participants are democratic countries, Vietnam might seem out of place as the only authoritarian participant. And, finally, Hanoi would also be the only Southeast Asian participant, effectively singling itself out as attempting to counter China—which is antithetical to the fundamental philosophy behind Vietnam's balancing act between the major powers.

With these critical counterpoints in mind, Vietnamese discussion on collective security arrangements are rare but generally favorable to the concept. The president of the DAV, Nguyen Vu Tung, recognized that, "[i]n addition to consolidating traditional alliances and expanding the four-party, three-party partnership and alliance, the U.S. raised the idea of building a 'rules-based security network' to gather 'like-minded' nations in order to prevent Chinese

²⁵⁴ See, for example, Derek Grossman, "Quad Supports US Goal to Preserve Rules-Based Order," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, February 7, 2019a.

²⁵⁵ For my work in this area, see Derek Grossman, "The Quad Is Not Enough," *Foreign Policy*, October 19, 2018b. For others' work, see, for example, Tom Corben, "The Quad, Vietnam, and the Role of Democratic Values," *The Diplomat*, May 25, 2018.

²⁵⁶ For more on Vietnam's role in a Quad Plus, see Derek Grossman, "Don't Get Too Excited, 'Quad Plus' Meetings Won't Cover China," *The Diplomat*, April 9, 2020.

influence.”²⁵⁷ Dinh Hoang Thang, former Vietnamese ambassador to the Netherlands, noted: “As a ‘frontier nation’ in setting up a ‘rules-based order’ in the SCS, Vietnam would become a proactive participant once ASEAN joins the Quad as the fifth member for regional peace and security.”²⁵⁸ Nguyen Quang Dy, a retired Vietnamese MFA official and frequent writer on international relations, stated: “[T]he U.S. and allies/potential partners need to connect together to form a de facto alliance based on cooperation and a collective security institution to contain China. Such an alliance may consist of core nations, such as the U.S., Japan, the Philippines, India, Australia, and Vietnam to conduct joint patrols in the SCS, complementing the collective security role of ASEAN, [which is] being undermined and divided to move the U.S.-China-Vietnam triangle away from China.”²⁵⁹

At an official level, the only apparent statement on Vietnam and the Quad that could be discovered came in November 2018, courtesy of Vietnamese Ambassador to India Pham Sanh Chau, who said: “Vietnam welcomes any initiative for maintenance of peace, security, freedom of navigation and overflight in the region. However, we do not want to see a military alliance formed because we believe that it is not conducive to the security environment in the region.”²⁶⁰ In response to Chau, Nguyen The Phuong, a research fellow at the Saigon Center on International Studies, observed: “Vietnam is still loyal to the Three No’s Defense policy, including no military alliance. As long as the Quad can neither define what it really is nor set its future agenda, Vietnam will consider the Quad a potential military alliance. . . . [To be successful], the Quad’s agenda should be adjusted to regional peace cooperation.”²⁶¹ Similarly, Nguyen Quang Dy in December 2018 commented:

At present, Vietnam is very cautious, not because it is uninterested, but it is afraid of China’s responses. Although it can (unofficially) upgrade ties with all the Quad members to strategic partnerships and enhance security-defense relations with each of them, Vietnam must (officially) announce the Three No’s policy. Vietnam is unprepared to join the Quad, but nothing would be impossible in the future once things change and the objectives and agenda of Quad are defined clearly and in line with the interests of regional nations (ASEAN). The regional nations can then participate in joint activities in the SCS such as patrol, antipiracy, search and rescue, and naval exercises.²⁶²

²⁵⁷ Nguyen Vu Tung, “Thế chế quốc tế và những vấn đề đặt ra cho Việt Nam” [“International Institutions and Issues for Vietnam”], *Central Council of Theories*, October 10, 2018b.

²⁵⁸ Dinh Hoang Thang, “Vietnam Facing New Movements in the Region,” *Van Hoa Nghe An*, July 30, 2018.

²⁵⁹ Nguyen Quang Dy, “Trung Quốc CÓ THỂ làm gì ở Biển Đông?” [“What Can China Do in the South China Sea?”], *Viet-studies.com*, February 25, 2016.

²⁶⁰ Shubhajit Roy, “Quad Talks Indo-Pacific; Vietnam Envoy Says Against Military Tie-Up,” *Indian Express*, November 16, 2018.

²⁶¹ Nguyen The Phuong, “Bình luận về đề xuất VN tham gia Bộ tứ Quad” [“Comments on the Suggestion on Vietnam’s Participation in Quad”], *BBC*, November 18, 2018.

²⁶² Nguyen Quang Dy, “Việt Nam và đối đầu Mỹ-Trung (P5)” [“Vietnam and US-China Confrontation (Part 5)”], *Nghien Cuu Quoc Te [International Studies]*, December 23, 2018.

Looking beyond the Quad, it is perhaps more likely that Vietnam might be interested in holding defense and security consultations in a trilateral format. Although none currently exists, once again likely attributable to Hanoi's Three No's policy, a Vietnam-Japan-U.S., Vietnam-India-U.S., or Vietnam-Australia-U.S. grouping would be obvious potential candidates. Without U.S. involvement, Vietnam-India-Japan or Vietnam-India-Russia is also conceivable, and if Vietnam wants to ensure that China does not feel excluded, then it could easily participate in a Vietnam-China-Russia or even a Vietnam-China-India arrangement. Of course, any trilateral incorporating China would automatically make Vietnam less willing to exchange sensitive information, especially on such topics as the SCS or BRI.

Conclusion

Over the past 25 years, Vietnam's security relationships have expanded significantly to both counter China and to professionalize and modernize the VPA. Key defense partners include the United States, Japan, India, Australia, Russia, and China—although interactions with China are severely circumscribed. Although the Three No's defense policy probably disallows for Vietnamese participation in the Quad or trilateral groupings on defense and security topics, Hanoi might still consider them if Beijing's behavior in the SCS becomes less manageable.

6. Vietnam Responds to Intensifying U.S.-China Competition

As U.S.-China competition heats up in multiple areas of the bilateral relationship, Vietnam is increasingly confronted with the difficult choice of whether to side with one country over the other or steer clear of the rivalry in favor of Vietnam's traditional approach of balancing between great powers. Although many of the Vietnamese interlocutors RAND interviewed expressed the need to strengthen U.S.-Vietnam relations, especially in the defense and security domain by raising the bilateral ties from a *comprehensive* to *strategic* partnership, none recommended that Hanoi "choose" Washington over Beijing. Indeed, the overwhelmingly common view was that Vietnam simply has no choice but to maintain its current foreign policy strategy—that is, unless or until its national interests are sufficiently challenged to force a selection.

Vietnam's Deteriorating Security and Economic Environment

Vietnamese officials and scholars certainly recognize the risks of intensifying U.S.-China competition and are constantly considering the potential geostrategic implications for Vietnam. Speaking at Vietnam's Diplomacy Conference in 2016, General Secretary Trong stated: "The Asia-Pacific itself has witnessed ongoing complex changes related to territorial disputes, sovereignty over seas and islands, and strategic competition among large powers that trigger instability. . . . It is therefore essential to make strategic forecasts and clarify the roots of current movements in the world, *especially the cooperation and struggle among large powers*, including the Asia-Pacific and East Asia, which is influential to our nation's interests in a vital region."²⁶³

The 12th Party Congress in 2016 issued a similar statement: "The Asia-Pacific, including Southeast Asia, remains the dynamic center of development with an increasingly important, strategic, political, geo-economics position in the world. It is simultaneously the strategically competitive region among certain large powers with many unstable factors. Disputes on territory and sovereignty over sea and island in the region and in the East Sea [the Vietnamese term for the SCS] continue to be fierce and complex."²⁶⁴ The VCP further highlighted at the event that "[l]arge nations have more assertively enhanced their military power and strategic competition in the region, and countries have to revise their development strategies and promote linkages for both cooperation and competition, particularly in trade, investment, human resource, science and

²⁶³ Nguyen Phu Trong, "Đối ngoại không chỉ là sự nối tiếp của chính sách đối nội, mà còn là một động lực mạnh mẽ góp phần thực hiện xây dựng và bảo vệ Tổ quốc Việt Nam xã hội chủ nghĩa" ["Foreign Policy Is Not Only a Continuation of Domestic Policy but a Strong Impetus for Contributing to Building and Defending Socialist Vietnamese Fatherland"], *Nhan Dan Online*, June 28, 2016b. Emphasis added.

²⁶⁴ Communist Party of Vietnam, "Báo cáo chính trị của Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng khóa XI tại Đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc lần thứ XII của Đảng" ["The 11th Party Central Committee Political Report at the 12th Party Congress"], March 31, 2016a.

technology.”²⁶⁵ Thus, the 12th Party Congress recommended that Vietnam “[s]trengthen and deepen the relations with partners, especially the strategic partners and major powers critical to the national security and development of the country, bringing the established framework into substantive implementation.”²⁶⁶

The president of the DAV, Nguyen Vu Tung, noted in 2018 that “increased U.S.-China strategic competition in the Asia-Pacific and in the world is mostly about building game rules.” In his view, China is “attaching economic prosperity of regional nations to Chinese development” so that it can “leverage its economic power as a tool for its foreign policy to increase its presence and influence in Asia-Pacific, ‘rewarding’ nations that aligned with Chinese strategic benefits and ‘punishing’ those affecting them.”²⁶⁷ Ultimately, according to Tung, Vietnam has an “increased risk of reliance on China [and] the direct pressure from the rise of China has driven [Vietnam] into a Chinese influential circle of geostrategy, raising the reliance on the Chinese economy and larger pressure from China’s promotion of soft power in the region.”²⁶⁸

Indeed, the frightful prospect of Vietnamese overreliance on, and eventual domination by, China is the single most important concern coloring Hanoi’s foreign policy approach. If this were to happen, it could have dramatic effects on Vietnam’s security and economy. Regarding defense and security, Senior Lt. Gen. Nguyen Trong Nghia, vice chairman of the General Department of Political Affairs at the MND, asserted that Vietnam “continues its ‘balance with large nations’ as the essential option in maintaining relations with superpowers. . . . It is necessary to plan for sustainable defense and security relations with large nations that have advanced defense industries. To continue to expand bilateral defense and security ties with large nations comprehensively but with priorities.”²⁶⁹ Additionally, in September 2017, Vietnam’s Central Council of Theoretical Science and the MND held a seminar about “current relations between great powers and implications on Vietnam and its responses,” once again underscoring the high priority Hanoi is placing on trying to figure out what growing competition among major powers might mean for Vietnam’s future security environment.²⁷⁰

From Hanoi’s perspective, growing U.S.-China competition is sure to have a negative impact on regional conflicts. Senior Colonel Le Duc Cuong, writing in the *National Defence Journal*,

²⁶⁵ Communist Party of Vietnam, “Báo cáo đánh giá kết quả thực hiện nhiệm vụ phát triển kinh tế - xã hội 5 năm 2011–2015 và phương hướng, nhiệm vụ phát triển kinh tế xã hội 5 năm 2016–2020” [“2011–2015 Socio-Economic Report and 2016–2020 Guidelines and Tasks for Socio-Economic Development”], March 31, 2016b.

²⁶⁶ Communist Party of Vietnam, 2016a.

²⁶⁷ Tung, 2018b.

²⁶⁸ Tung, 2018a.

²⁶⁹ Nguyen Trong Nghia, “Xử lý đúng đắn mối quan hệ với các nư-c lớn - yếu tố quan trọng để giữ vững độc lập, tự chủ và chủ quyền quốc gia trong quá trình tích cực, chủ động hội nhập quốc tế” [“Properly Handling Relations with Great Powers, the Important Factor to Sustain Independence and Autonomy and National Sovereignty in International Integration”], *National Defence Journal*, December 11, 2017.

²⁷⁰ Communist Party of Vietnam, 2017.

commented, “The concurrent appearance of China’s BRI and the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy will possibly lead to tensions and competition as the ‘zero-sum game,’ particularly in hot spots, such as the East Sea [SCS], the South East Sea, Taiwan, and Korean peninsula.”²⁷¹ Deputy Defense Minister Vinh, honing in on the impact to the SCS, observed: “The Asia-Pacific is shifting in the balance of power and strategic competition among large nations. The complex political, economic, and security issues of certain ASEAN countries and the influence of large nations will affect the consensus standpoints of the Community, including the SCS dispute.”²⁷² To be sure, many Vietnamese officials and academics consider the SCS as “the centerpiece of the geopolitical competition between America and China.”²⁷³ For example, according to Dinh Hoang Thang, the former Vietnamese ambassador to the Netherlands, Vietnam could become a “battlefield nation” on the SCS chessboard.²⁷⁴ Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh has concluded that Hanoi must “persistently pursue a multilateral diplomacy to cope with U.S.-China competition and the militarization in the SCS.”²⁷⁵

At the same time, economic competition is on the rise between great powers and specifically between the United States and China. The economic dimension is highlighted in Vietnamese government documents, as exemplified in the 2013 resolution of the VCP’s Political Bureau (Politburo) and the following national strategy on international integration, which stressed: “Economic competition is increasingly complicated. Large nations have competed more intensively to mobilize forces through initiatives of economic integration.”²⁷⁶ This competition manifests itself even within such cooperative mechanisms as CPTPP, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, and the FTA of the Asia-Pacific.²⁷⁷

Additionally, Hanoi is very closely monitoring the implications of the ongoing U.S.-China trade war on Vietnamese economic security and national interests. Vietnam is particularly trying to insulate itself from potential Chinese blowback and considering ways to become more self-reliant by enhancing trade with other markets and pursuing new trade agreements. In late May 2019, for instance, the MFA spokesperson noted: “This is the common concern for the international community due to its impact on the global trade and economy. Vietnam closely follows the issue and hopes the two countries will soon resolve the disputes through dialogues

²⁷¹ Cuong, 2018.

²⁷² Nguyen Chi Vinh, “Tiền đề to lớn để thực hiện công tác đối ngoại quốc phòng năm 2018” [“Significant Premise for External Relations of Defense in 2018”], *Quân đội nhân dân* [People’s Army Newspaper], February 20, 2018.

²⁷³ Le, 2019b; The Le Mau, “The SCS Is the ‘Lethal Spot’ in US-China Strategic Competition,” *VietTimes*, January 9, 2019a.

²⁷⁴ Dinh Hoang Thang, Tran Ngoc Vuong, and Phan Van Thang, “2017: Vietnam and the World,” *Van Hoa Nghe An*, December 18, 2017.

²⁷⁵ Trong Thuan, “Phó thủ tướng: Đa phương hóa để đứng vững trước các thách thức” [“DPM: Multilateralization to Be Resilient to Challenges”], *Zing*, January 15, 2019.

²⁷⁶ Communist Party of Vietnam, “Nghị quyết số 22-NQ/TW ngày 10/4/2013 của Bộ Chính trị về hội nhập quốc tế” [“Politburo Resolution No. 22 on International Integration”], CPV Online News, undated.

²⁷⁷ Vietnamese Ministry of Planning and Investment, “Chiến lược tổng thể hội nhập kinh tế quốc tế đến năm 2020, tầm nhìn đến năm 2030” [“General Strategy of International Integration by 2020 and Vision 2030”], undated.

and negotiations in the spirit of respect, cooperation and mutual understanding, contributing to peace, stability, cooperation, and development in the region and the world.”²⁷⁸ Following up on these comments a few days later, Prime Minister Phuc noted: “The unpredictable U.S.-China trade tension is one of the largest challenges. The world is changing complexly, and we may get trapped if we are not conscious.”²⁷⁹ He requires the Ministry of Industry and Trade to closely monitor the impacts of U.S.-China trade war and have different responsive scenarios. Phuc has also asked the State Bank of Vietnam to monitor, evaluate, and forecast the impacts of international financial and monetary markets on the exchange and interest rates to respond in timely fashion and to continue raising the foreign reserve as a buffer against external shocks.²⁸⁰ Phuc in September 2018 also said that “Vietnam must be more self-reliant and will seek more trade arrangements with other nations apart from the 12 existing FTAs.”²⁸¹

According to Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh: “Vietnam will not be able to avoid the impacts of trade protectionism,” because of the open nature of its economy. He further conveyed:

We are watching the situation carefully and will implement any necessary counter measures. . . . Some point to Vietnam as a beneficiary of the trade war. To some extent that is true. However, protectionism will have a long-lasting impact on the global economy including Vietnam. . . . The prolongation of the U.S.-China trade friction will hit our production. . . . The country will be on guard against transactions that merely funnel goods through Vietnam to bypass trade barriers between the two economic powers.²⁸²

Vietnam’s Ministry of Industry and Trade agrees: “The U.S.-China trade war cannot be an opportunity for Vietnam. As a very open economy, the challenges to Vietnamese exports are clear. The U.S. also imposes tariff and trade barriers on its allies. In addition, Vietnam needs to have self-defense measures against Chinese goods flooding into Vietnam due to U.S. tariffs.”²⁸³

Interestingly, an article in the *Communist Review* took a slightly less alarmist position on the U.S.-China trade war, identifying both opportunities and challenges. On the potential opportunities front, “Vietnam may increase exports to the U.S. (including electronic, high-tech, manufactured products, garments, textile, footwear, furniture, agricultural products) and import high-tech products from China. FDI from both nations may flow into Vietnam. Production from

²⁷⁸ Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “The 7th Regular Press Conference (23/05/2019),” webpage, May 23, 2019b.

²⁷⁹ Ha Bui, “Yêu cầu Bộ Công Thương có kịch bản ứng phó chiến tranh thương mại” [“Ministry of Trade and Industry Required to Have Scenarios Responding to Trade War”], *Zing*, June 2, 2019.

²⁸⁰ Bui, 2019.

²⁸¹ Phuong Dung, “Prime Minister: Vietnam Will Find a New Way to Respond to US-China Trade War,” *Dân trí*, September 11, 2018.

²⁸² J. Nagumo and Coco Liu, “Vietnam Will Not Escape Impact of Trade War, Foreign Minister Warns,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, May 30, 2019.

²⁸³ Hieu Cong, “Cuộc chiến thương mại Mỹ-Trung: Tìm cách tự vệ với hàng Trung Quốc” [“US-China Trade War: How to Defense Against Chinese Goods”], *Zing*, July 9, 2018.

China will move to Vietnam.” However, the list of potential challenges was longer, suggesting overall worries about where the trade war is heading. Concerns included the following:

Long-term negative spillover that could impact Vietnamese hi-tech and agricultural products; Vietnamese GDP could drop by 0.03–0.12% in the next five years (approximately \$260 million per year); there will be increasing pressure to sustain macroeconomic stability and to stabilize exchange rates and curb inflation; challenges will grow with Vietnamese currency (VND) due to U.S. dollar revaluation and Chinese yuan devaluation; Chinese goods will flood into Vietnam; U.S. protectionist policies might impose tariffs and attract U.S. firms to move back home from Vietnam.²⁸⁴

Vietnam’s head of the General Statistics Office, Nguyen Bich Lam, similarly raised both opportunities and challenges, adding that Chinese firms may export goods to the United States through Vietnam to evade tariffs.²⁸⁵ In late June 2019, President Trump had apparently concluded that this was happening and railed against Vietnam in an interview with the Fox Business network.²⁸⁶

Vietnamese expert commentaries outside government and the VCP also offered a mixed picture of the future, though still weighted toward the negative for Vietnam’s long-term interests. For example, in a piece from May 2019, academics argued: “In the short term, Vietnam may benefit from the U.S.-China trade war through replacing Vietnam’s Chinese exports of goods to the U.S. market and the relocation of China-based manufacturers to Vietnam.” However, “in the longer-term, the U.S.-China trade war presents challenges to Vietnam’s export-led and foreign investment-led growth model. . . . Vietnam needs to adopt economic policies to achieve a truly market-based economy and improve public investment to maintain and enhance the growth momentum.”²⁸⁷

Vietnam Blames China for Deteriorating Security Environment: Time to Upgrade U.S. Ties

Even though Vietnam will almost certainly continue to refuse picking sides in rising U.S.-China competition, it has, however, concluded that China is to blame for current tensions. This is notable because the position suggests that Washington has a sympathetic ear in Hanoi and that the two countries genuinely are like-minded partners in dealing with the security and economic threats posed by China in the Indo-Pacific.

²⁸⁴ Minh Quan, “Vietnam Facing Opportunities and Challenges from the US-China Trade War,” *Communist Review*, February 1, 2019.

²⁸⁵ Thuy Hien, “Thương chiến Mỹ—Trung: Nguy cơ thâm hụt thương mại với Trung Quốc có gia tăng?” [“U.S.-China Trade War—Will the Risk of Trade Deficit with China Increase?”], *BNews*, May 30, 2019.

²⁸⁶ Julia Limitone, “Trump on China Trade Talks: I Will Impose ‘Very Substantial’ Additional Tariffs If No Deal Is Reached,” Fox Business, June 26, 2019.

²⁸⁷ Tuan Ho, Trang Thi Ngoc Nguyen, and Tho Ngoc Tran, “How Will Vietnam Cope with the Impact of the US-China Trade War?” Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, November 21, 2018.

Throughout RAND's interviews in Vietnam, the message was consistent: There was much more the United States and Vietnam could and *should* do together to counter China. According to Nguyen Vu Tung of the DAV, for example, "China has adjusted its foreign policy, abandoning the 'hide and bide' principle and excessively asserting its 'large power diplomacy' and 'neighboring diplomacy' to enhance its influence in the Asia-Pacific and in the world. . . . China is trying to change the regional order so that the U.S. has to withdraw from the region or accept a new 'co-existence' formula with a larger role of China."²⁸⁸ Separately, a recent article in the MFA newspaper assessed that China would not return to the more passive "bide and hide" strategy prevalent before President Xi, in which Beijing eschewed aggressive foreign policy behavior. Instead, Beijing under Xi has adopted a policy of "one step back, two steps forward" in the current competition with Washington, and Beijing would never abandon the goal of overcoming the United States to be the world's top power.²⁸⁹ Lai Thai Binh, deputy director of the Americas at the MFA, argued in the *Communist Review* that "China has always put pressure in many aspects on the region [Asia-Pacific]. China has also focused on promoting 'a new type of relations of powers' with the U.S. [through] security and economic pillars and regional forums, propaganda, people-to-people exchange, and building of Confucius Institutes in many countries both within and outside the region."²⁹⁰

In response, Vietnamese interlocutors, as mentioned, have proposed raising Vietnam's relationship with the United States to that of a strategic partnership to underscore the enduring strategic interests both sides have to counter China in the region. For example, according to Nguyen Quang Dy, a retired MFA official and frequent writer on international relations, "it is time for Vietnam and the United States to upgrade their relations to 'strategic partnership' in the upcoming visit to the U.S. by General Secretary Trong" (however, he got ill in 2019 and was unable to travel, and with coronavirus pandemic in 2020, the visit was apparently postponed again). For Dy, the following eight steps would help reach that goal: (1) the United States addressing the war legacy; (2) both countries cooperating on oil and gas in the SCS; (3) both countries enhancing naval exchanges; (4) the United States enhancing its assistance to Vietnam on capacity for naval patrols; (5) Vietnam participating in military drills (that is, noncontroversial and multilateral activities, such as the Rim of the Pacific Exercise) and joint patrol of the SCS (with the United States and other partners); (6) both countries cooperating on rescue, military medicine, training, and intelligence; (7) the United States establishing a logistic warehouse (in Da Nang); and (8) Vietnam purchasing U.S. arms.²⁹¹

²⁸⁸ Tung, 2018a.

²⁸⁹ Minh Vuong, "Trung Quốc có quay lại sách lược 'giấu mình chờ thời'?" ["Would China Return to the 'Hide and Bide' Policy?"], *Bao Quoc Te [World and Vietnam Report]*, March 14, 2019.

²⁹⁰ Lai Thai Binh, "New Dynamics of International Relations," *Communist Review*, June 23, 2016.

²⁹¹ Nguyen Quang Dy, "Việt Nam 2019: Có thể làm gì và không nên làm gì" ["Vietnam in 2019: What It Can Do and Should Not Do"], *Viet-studies.com*, April 8, 2019.

To be sure, in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, interlocutors proposed many other ways in which the United States and Vietnam could strengthen their cooperation. Some of our conversations focused on creating a legal regime that might hold Beijing accountable for future violations in the SCS. For example, one Vietnamese interlocutor proposed that the United States and Vietnam jointly conduct research on the SCS to demonstrate that China has no legal justification for its expansive sovereignty claims.²⁹² Other countries, like the Philippines, could be included in these activities to establish a “league of justice for law.”²⁹³ Either way, Washington’s neutrality is a wrongheaded approach, according to interlocutors, and the United States and Vietnam must work together to prevent China from establishing straight baselines in the SCS and flouting the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling in 2016.²⁹⁴ Hanoi, however, does not seek to contain Beijing but simply to force it to play by the previously established rules under UNCLOS.²⁹⁵ Regardless, repeat events, such as what happened at Scarborough Shoal in 2012 (China took over de facto control from the Philippines without resistance), cannot be tolerated, according to former Vietnamese officials.²⁹⁶

Relatedly, deeper bilateral cooperation on maritime security is essential. VCG cooperation, for instance, with the U.S. Coast Guard, might better deter Beijing’s attempts to use gray zone tactics against Hanoi and other regional claimants.²⁹⁷ For these interlocutors, it is important that the United States not only insert military forces in the SCS but also maintain a robust civilian presence, especially in the area of resource extraction, to blunt and constantly challenge China’s expansive claims.²⁹⁸ Overall, Washington should publicize redlines that future Chinese activities ought not cross and work with Hanoi and other partners to prevent total Chinese domination of the region. Admittedly, however, doing so on the Vietnamese side would require raising Vietnam’s “political will” to engage more robustly with the United States in these areas without the fear of blowback from China.²⁹⁹

It is also essential for the United States to show up at and participate in multilateral forums pertaining to the SCS so that all may see the sustainability of U.S. commitments to the Indo-Pacific. Multiple Vietnamese interlocutors hope that the United States will continue to support Vietnamese interests in such venues as ARF, ADMM+, and EAS, as well as support Hanoi’s position as a nonpermanent member of the United Nations Security Council from 2020 to 2021.³⁰⁰

²⁹² RAND interview with former Vietnamese official, Hanoi, April 2019.

²⁹³ RAND interview with former Vietnamese official, Hanoi, April 2019.

²⁹⁴ RAND interviews with former Vietnamese officials, Hanoi, April 2019.

²⁹⁵ RAND interviews with former Vietnamese officials, Hanoi, April 2019.

²⁹⁶ RAND interviews with former Vietnamese officials, Hanoi, April 2019.

²⁹⁷ RAND interviews with former Vietnamese officials, Hanoi, April 2019.

²⁹⁸ RAND interviews with former Vietnamese officials, Hanoi, April 2019.

²⁹⁹ RAND interviews with former Vietnamese officials, Hanoi, April 2019.

³⁰⁰ RAND interviews with former Vietnamese officials, Hanoi, April 2019.

Yet another critical element of strengthening U.S.-Vietnam cooperation pertains to building trust following the conclusion of the Vietnam War, and the most fruitful way of doing this is to enthusiastically continue with addressing war-legacy issues. Several Vietnamese interlocutors, for instance, were thrilled that the U.S. Agency for International Development had recently completed Agent Orange cleanup at Da Nang Air Base and were looking forward to similar success at Bien Hoa and beyond.³⁰¹

In the economic sphere, the United States must be willing, and demonstrate the capacity, to challenge China's BRI in Vietnam. One immediate way of doing that would be for Washington to enter into investment negotiations as Hanoi proceeds with the construction of its North-South Expressway infrastructure project, which ultimately seeks to link Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.³⁰² As mentioned, Vietnam is worried that the project will be looped into BRI, raising worrisome security and economic challenges. At least attempting to compete with Beijing in this area would play quite positively in Vietnam. Furthermore, the absence of U.S. participation in the TPP continues to hurt Vietnam, making the relationship ripe for the signing of a bilateral FTA with similar terms as the TPP to demonstrate the U.S. commitment to supporting Vietnam's economic development. Unfortunately, the U.S.-China trade war tends to undermine this objective more than help it, but finding substantive options as part of enhanced economic interconnectivity as called for in the Indo-Pacific Strategy may help mitigate these negative aspects.

Finally, multiple Vietnamese interlocutors complained that Washington tends to overlook Vietnam's concerns throughout the rest of Indochina—in particular, China's growing influence in Laos and Cambodia, as well as the negative environmental impacts of BRI activities there.³⁰³ Greater U.S. attention to these concerns, and working with the Vietnamese to address them (for example, through LMI), is extremely important to furthering bilateral relations going forward.

Vietnam Likely to Remain in Hedging Mode in the Coming Years

Although it is nearly impossible to predict where the U.S.-China rivalry is heading in the coming years, especially in light of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, one thing is for certain: Vietnam will remain in hedging mode unless or until China forces its hand, whether in the SCS or in another area of the bilateral relationship. This position is best summed up by the former vice minister of foreign affairs and the former Vietnamese ambassador to the United States, Pham Quang Vinh: “How to handle the competition between large powers? We have to rely on national interests and international law. If they touch on those issues, we have to raise our voice. It needs to affirm that we want to have good relations with both the U.S. and China, and we have

³⁰¹ RAND interviews with former officials, Hanoi, April 2019.

³⁰² RAND interviews with former officials, Hanoi, April 2019.

³⁰³ RAND interviews with former Vietnamese officials, Hanoi, April 2019.

to handle the differences in relations with them and their competition. We will deepen bilateral ties as much as we can.”³⁰⁴

If the United States and China moved to open armed conflict in the SCS over an area elsewhere in the region, such as near the Philippines, Hanoi would likely support U.S. objectives, but perhaps within strict limits and covertly to avoid antagonizing Beijing. Alternatively, Vietnam could just as easily decide that neutrality is the least risky course of action and therefore the path Hanoi should adopt, since it must live next to China regardless of the outcome. It is simply too difficult to know what Vietnam might choose in this scenario. However, if U.S.-China military conflict occurred outside the SCS (such as over Taiwan or the Senkaku [Diaoyu] Islands dispute with Japan in the East China Sea), then Vietnam is very likely to remain neutral. As long as the conflict does not threaten Vietnam’s national sovereignty, territorial integrity, or political stability, there would simply be no reason for Hanoi to get involved.

This will probably be especially true as Vietnam fulfills the role of nonpermanent member status at the United Nations Security Council from 2020 to 2021. Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh, for example, has said: “Participating in the [United Nations] also means that we seek to contribute our part to maintaining peace and stability in the region and the world at large that is conducive to the country’s own developments.”³⁰⁵ Vietnam’s national interests, however, will continue to be of paramount importance during this period. Vietnam will likely continue to seek balance between the United States and China—albeit with sufficient U.S. pressure on China to challenge its expansive sovereignty claims in the SCS and willingness to counter BRI’s negative effects.

Conclusion

As U.S.-China competition rises, Vietnam is likely to stay the course of balancing between these great powers for as long as feasible. But, importantly, it appears that Hanoi blames Beijing for the growing rivalry with Washington. Vietnamese interlocutors interviewed for this study generally seek an elevation in the U.S.-Vietnam partnership to the strategic level to underscore the enduring strategic interests both sides have to counter China in the region.

³⁰⁴ Trong Thuan-Vu Manh, “Việt ‘am và ’uộc cờ lợi ích dân tộc trong thế giới đang thay đổi” [“Vietnam and the Chess Game of National Interest in a Changing World”], *Zing*, February 2019.

³⁰⁵ Trung Hung and Van Toan, “Vietnam and UNSC: Partnership for Sustainable Peace,” *Nhan Dan*, June 2019.

7. Assessing U.S.-China Influence in Vietnam and Implications

The preceding analysis demonstrates that China, not the United States or any other country, holds the preponderance of influence over Vietnam’s decisionmaking. As the unavoidable partner, China has several key advantages in the influence competition versus the United States, including immutable geography and shared historical, ideological, language, and cultural experiences. Furthermore, Beijing’s rising military and economic power compel Hanoi to pay close attention to China’s every move and to carefully game out the future based on perceived Chinese calculations. The framework analysis developed for this report further shows that China maintains a healthy level of economic influence over Vietnam and holds the most sway overall. However, and significantly, the United States is ahead of China in the security domain and is slightly ahead in the diplomatic and political domains as well. The implications of these findings are significant and explored in greater detail in this chapter.

Framework for Grading Relative Influence

As part of the RAND series on Washington’s Indo-Pacific partners, this report employs a graphical framework to assess U.S. versus Chinese influence in Vietnam based on qualitative and quantitative measures across diplomatic, economic, and military variables. First introduced in Chapter 1, the variables are presented here again as Table 7.1 for convenience. It includes eight variables of shared interests and six variables of relative capabilities.

The United States and China Have Similar Diplomatic Influence, but Washington Has a Slight Edge

Regarding analysis of the diplomatic and political variable, available evidence suggests that although the United States and China probably have similar diplomatic influence over Vietnam, Washington appears to maintain a slight edge on Beijing. The first variable (diplomatic and political ties), however, clearly favors Beijing. Vietnam, unlike any of the other countries studied by RAND, is ideologically linked to China as a fellow socialist authoritarian nation. China is a comprehensive strategic cooperative partner to Vietnam—the highest level of any great power and two levels above the United States’ current status—underscoring the closeness in ties despite their sharp disagreements in the SCS. Additionally, Vietnam’s mimicking of originally Chinese concepts—whether the cybersecurity law, draft SEZ law, President Xi’s anticorruption campaign, “people’s war” at sea, or even “reform and opening up” itself—is a testament to China’s exceptional influence over Vietnamese politics and decisionmaking. Although the United States is becoming an increasingly important partner to Vietnam and may even eventually

rise to the level of being a strategic partner, China is very likely to maintain the inside track for the foreseeable future.

Table 7.1. Variables for Assessing Relative U.S.-China Influence

Source of Influence	Type	Description
Diplomatic and political		
Diplomatic and political ties	Shared interest	How diplomatically and politically important the United States or China is to the partner and the extent of diplomatic ties
Support for U.S. versus Chinese vision for the region	Shared interest	How the partner's views of the ideal regional order aligns with the U.S. vision for the region and U.S. values versus assessed Chinese vision and values for the region
Views of U.S. commitment to the region	Shared interest	How confident (or not confident) the partner is about U.S. commitment or staying power in the region
Public opinion	Shared interest	Relative public perceptions of favorability of the United States versus China
Economic		
<i>Economic dependence</i>	Relative capability	The partner's current economic dependence on the United States versus China, measured by aggregating trade, investment, and tourism
<i>Economic opportunity</i>	Relative capability	How much the partner believes the United States versus China can provide future economic benefits
<i>Threat perceptions of the United States versus China (economic)</i>	Relative capability	How much the partner views U.S. or Chinese economic influence as potentially threatening, subversive, or coercive
Willingness to work with the United States versus China based on economic threat perceptions	Shared interest	Whether the partner's economic threat perception encourages it to work more with the United States or China to balance against the other economically
Military and security		
<i>Threat perceptions of the United States versus China (military)</i>	Relative capability	How much the partner views the United States or China as a military or security threat
Willingness to work with the United States versus China based on military threat perceptions	Shared interest	Whether the partner's military threat perception encourages it to work more with the United States or China to balance against the other militarily
Support for major U.S.-led security efforts	Shared interest	How much the partner generally supports the United States on security issues through its participation in or opposition to major U.S.-led international or regional security efforts
<i>Military cooperation</i>	Relative capability	How much the partner is working closely with the United States versus China militarily
<i>U.S. versus Chinese military capability</i>	Relative capability	How the partner views U.S. versus Chinese military capability
Perception of U.S. willingness to aid Vietnam in conflict with China	Shared interest	How confident (or not confident) the partner is about U.S. willingness to come to its military defense in a potential conflict involving China

NOTE: Variables measuring shared interests are roman, and variables measuring relative capability are italicized.

On the second variable (support for U.S. versus Chinese vision for the region), Vietnam slightly favors the U.S. instead of Chinese vision, evidenced by Hanoi's quiet support of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy's core objectives to keep the region "free and open" from (Chinese) coercion.³⁰⁶ Washington's position to maintain a rules-based order in the SCS is one obvious area of bilateral agreement, but another, perhaps less often discussed point of consensus is on the need to push back against China's BRI. In this vein, Hanoi had been eager to join the TPP and was very disappointed with Washington's decision to withdraw from the U.S.-led trade arrangement. Nevertheless, Hanoi actively supports LMI and welcomes further U.S. focus on wider Indochina challenges. Overall, Vietnam is supportive of U.S. initiatives, especially those that help it balance against Chinese actions, whether in the SCS or via BRI.

Vietnam is probably less convinced that the United States is committed to the region over the longer term, as measured by the third variable (views of U.S. commitment to the region). Vietnamese interlocutors have observed Chinese actions against the Philippines, especially when Beijing seized Scarborough Shoal in 2012, and observed no punitive measures taken by the United States in response. During the May 2014 oil rig standoff against China, Vietnam similarly did not receive anything more than rhetorical support, once again suggesting that Hanoi ought not depend on U.S. involvement, as it is likely to be minimal. In a more recent example, the Trump administration only rhetorically railed against China's "bullying behavior" in the 2019 standoff near Vanguard Bank.³⁰⁷ Nevertheless, the Trump administration has conducted more FONOPs than under the Obama administration to challenge Chinese sovereignty claims in the SCS.³⁰⁸ Vietnamese interlocutors have certainly taken notice of this, but, overall, remain quite skeptical of the sustainability of the Indo-Pacific Strategy and Washington's particular commitment to Hanoi.

On public opinion, the last variable under the diplomatic and political variable, the United States dominates China. As noted, Vietnamese favorability of the United States is at least 90 percent, while favorability of China is perhaps as low as 10 percent. Visceral anti-Chinese sentiment throughout Vietnamese society, propelled by concerns over the SCS and BRI, will ensure that U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relations remain in good standing for years to come. Moreover, Washington's efforts to engage in war-legacy issues, particularly regarding Agent Orange cleanup within affected areas, is an important pillar to build trust in the form of people-to-people ties.

³⁰⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, 2019b.

³⁰⁷ Morgan Ortagus, "Chinese Coercion on Oil and Gas Activity in the South China Sea," press release, U.S. Department of State, July 20, 2019.

³⁰⁸ Exact numbers are difficult to come by, but, for example, Collin Koh of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies keeps an ongoing tally on Twitter. The most recent update is Collin Koh [@CollinSLKoh], "As promised, the updated FONOP table reflecting latest mission by USS Montgomery, the first FONOP of 2020 and second by a littoral combat ship," Twitter post, January 28, 2020.

China's Economic Presence Looms Large

Beijing's most potent weapon against Vietnam is its economic dependence on its larger neighbor to the north. In the economic variable, Chinese influence is certainly dominant over the United States. Regarding the first variable (economic dependence—specifically, the level of Vietnam's economic dependence on China versus the United States), Beijing clearly comes out ahead. As detailed earlier, China is Vietnam's top trading partner, valued at approximately \$106.7 billion, composing just over 22 percent of Vietnam's total trade. And as stated above, outflows of Chinese FDI to Vietnam in 2018 were approximately \$1.15 billion.³⁰⁹ And another key aspect of China's economic engagement and leverage in Vietnam is BRI. Although China maintains the preponderance of influence here, Vietnam is also diversifying its economic partners, to include the United States and others, which suggests that Chinese influence might ebb in the coming years.

The ceiling would appear to be high for the second variable (economic opportunity—specifically, the extent of U.S.-Vietnam economic cooperation), not just to counter China but also to mutually improve bilateral relations. However, Washington's inability thus far to deliver on the TPP, for which Hanoi had made significant sacrifices and systemic changes, and the lack of a signed FTA between the two partners have reasonably called the United States' economic commitment to Vietnam into question. And, yet, it has also widely been reported that Vietnam is the unexpected winner of the Trump administration's trade war against China. The problem with this second point, however, is that it is simply through happenstance. In the future, if Washington showed more of a conscious effort to assist Hanoi economically so that it could avoid overdependence on Beijing, then U.S. influence would correspondingly increase within this variable.

For the third variable (threat perceptions of the United States versus China [economic]), the analysis here underscores Vietnam's deep distrust for China's BRI, not only through infrastructure development projects in Vietnam but also in neighboring countries, particularly in Cambodia and Laos. As noted above, Hanoi worries that BRI will bring large numbers of Chinese workers to Vietnam who subsequently set up encampments there and never leave, posing a long-term security challenge. Beijing is also funneling large amounts of money toward infrastructure projects in Cambodia and Laos, which traditionally have been friendly to Vietnam but might not be in the future if the majority of the assistance is coming from China. Some of this money has probably been diverted to building military bases in Cambodia that could be used to threaten Vietnam on its western flank and in the SCS. Environmental disasters stemming from BRI are also possible, especially in the area of dam construction, which might limit water flows down to the Mekong Delta. Chinese construction activities could create sediment erosion and

³⁰⁹ "Vietnam's 10 Biggest Trading Partners," 2019.

fishing shortages or result in massive flooding were a dam to break that would destroy this extremely sensitive and important farming region.

Finally, on the fourth variable (willingness to work with the United States versus China based on economic threat perceptions—specifically, whether the immensity of China’s economic threat encourages Vietnam to work with the United States instead), Hanoi appears to have diversified its partners, including the United States, South Korea, Japan, and the European Union, to limit its overdependence on economic interactions with China. Vietnam is certainly eager to break out of the potential for overdependence economically on China, and thus this should be viewed as an important growth area in U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relations. Progress on this front may also complement the activities of U.S. allies and partners who maintain their own bilateral and multilateral trade agreements with Vietnam, such as through the CPTPP or EVFTA.

The United States Has Key Advantages in the Security Domain

On the first variable within the military and security variable (threat perceptions of the United States versus China [military]), the analysis here strongly indicates that Vietnam’s top assessed security threat is China, suggesting that Beijing’s coercive activities in the SCS are paramount in Hanoi’s decisionmaking. Hanoi is also likely to become increasingly alarmed at Beijing’s activities in wider Indochina in such places as Cambodia, where China is apparently building naval and air bases. Beyond the geopolitics, Beijing’s massive military buildup and modernization in recent years—along with expansion of CCG and PAFMM forces to bolster PLA operations—have significantly enhanced the PLA’s ability to conduct joint operations against Vietnamese interests, and the VPA has done little to mount an effective response.

Regarding the second variable (willingness to work with the United States versus China based on military threat perceptions), it is fair to say that the oil rig incident in disputed waters in May 2014 and the more recent China-Vietnam standoff over drilling at Vanguard Bank in July 2019 have gone a long way toward convincing Hanoi that its careful balancing act between Beijing and Washington might not be adequately serving its national security interests. But Hanoi is yet to depart from the Three No’s defense policy or officially endorse the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy—steps that would seem necessary to indicate a shift in willingness to support the United States against China.

On the third variable (support for major U.S.-led security efforts—specifically, to what extent Vietnam participates in or supports U.S.-led initiatives or efforts), Hanoi is generally, albeit quietly, supportive of the Indo-Pacific Strategy and its components, such as FONOPs and the Quad. However, because of the Three No’s defense policy, Vietnam is unlikely to vocalize and act on such support for fear of the negative Chinese response.

Regarding the fourth variable (military cooperation), once again the Three No’s defense policy is the primary limiting factor in closer U.S.-Vietnam military ties. Vietnam has not participated in any U.S.-led military operations abroad. However, as the analysis in this report also demonstrates, the VPA-PLA relationship is quite limited as well. One could plausibly argue

that the United States is actually doing *more* with Vietnam than China in terms of nontraditional military operations, such as HA/DR, SAR, PKO, and other forms of training. Washington also sells numerous weapon systems and combat support equipment to Hanoi, whereas Beijing does not. But China’s deep army-to-army ties based on ideological alignment, historical cooperation against foreign forces, and mutual desires to maintain cordial relations—especially at the once-hostile land border—cloud any clear success the U.S. military has experienced in recent years in Vietnam.

On the fifth variable (U.S. versus Chinese military capability), Vietnam clearly looks to the U.S. military as the only viable balancer to China’s growing military power. Vietnamese interlocutors spoke at length about the importance of FONOPs and deterring China through other shows of military strength, suggesting that the United States has an edge in this area, but only if it chooses to use its capabilities more often and to greater effect in Vietnamese minds.

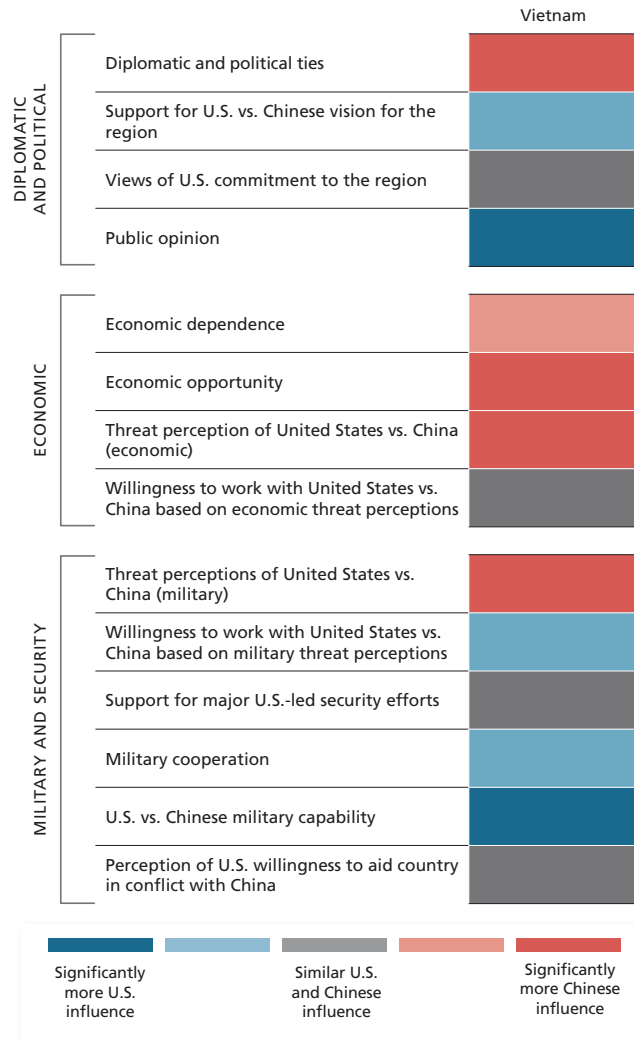
On the sixth variable (perception of U.S. willingness to aid Vietnam in conflict with China), the assessments in this report strongly suggest that Vietnam does not expect any military support from the United States. For example, Hanoi’s emphasis on the Three No’s defense policy precludes the establishment of formal military alliances. But given the Trump administration’s emphasis on keeping the region “free and open” through its Indo-Pacific Strategy, and the corresponding increase in FONOPs to demonstrate U.S. resolve to prevent China from undermining or overturning the rules-based international order, Vietnam may have slightly higher expectations today that the United States might support it militarily. Notably, however, the recent Vietnam-China standoff near Vanguard Bank did not result in any U.S. military assistance. See Figure 7.1 for a summary of relative U.S. and Chinese influence in Vietnam.

Implications for the U.S. Department of Defense’s Indo-Pacific Strategy

The analysis that China is Vietnam’s unavoidable partner holds significant implications for the United States’ Indo-Pacific Strategy. The strategy, derived from the National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy that came before it, “affirms the enduring U.S. commitment to stability and prosperity in the region through the pursuit of preparedness, partnerships, and promoting a networked region.”³¹⁰ As mentioned, perhaps the most important phrase of the entire strategy is the vision of keeping the Indo-Pacific “free and open”—that is, keeping regional governance and economic systems “free” from the coercive activities of any great power (China), while keeping strategic waterways (specifically, the SCS) “open” to freedom of navigation. The strategy is very much tied in with maintaining a rules-based international order and commonly accepted norms of behavior.

³¹⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, 2019b.

Figure 7.1. Relative U.S. and Chinese Influence in Vietnam



Specific to the U.S.-Vietnam defense partnership, the Indo-Pacific Strategy reads:

The Department is building a strategic partnership with Vietnam that is based on common interests and principles, including freedom of navigation, respect for a rules-based order in accordance with international law, and recognition of national sovereignty. The U.S.-Vietnam defense relationship has grown dramatically over the past several years, as symbolized by the historic March 2018 visit of a U.S. aircraft carrier for the first time since the Vietnam War.

The Department is working to improve Vietnam’s defense capabilities by providing 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. The U.S. military also engages in numerous annual training exchanges and activities to enhance bilateral cooperation and interoperability with the Vietnam People’s Army, Air Force, Navy, and Coast Guard. Additionally, DoD [the U.S. Department of Defense] has provided training and technical assistance to support

Vietnam’s 2018 deployment of a medical unit to the U.N. Peacekeeping Mission in South Sudan, and will continue to provide assistance to facilitate future deployments.

Our increasingly strong defense ties are based on a foundation of close cooperation to address legacy of war and humanitarian issues, which predates the restoration of diplomatic relations in 1995. As we look to celebrate 25 years of diplomatic relations in 2020, DoD remains committed to supporting U.S. efforts to clean up dioxin contamination and remove unexploded ordnance, and appreciates Vietnam’s continued assistance to account for U.S. personnel missing from the Vietnam War.³¹¹

The analysis here indeed supports the notion that Vietnam is in favor, albeit quietly, of maintaining a “free and open” Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, the bilateral defense relationship has clearly grown significantly to correspond to China’s growing assertiveness in the SCS. The U.S. Department of Defense is also smartly exploring nontraditional areas of military cooperation, such as PKO, maritime security, and institutional capacity-building exchanges, to avoid triggering Three No’s defense policy restrictions.³¹² And deepening people-to-people ties based on first removing remaining Agent Orange contamination from impacted areas is a highly lucrative area to develop the U.S.-Vietnam partnership.

However, the analysis also demonstrates that Vietnam is concerned about the sustainability of the Indo-Pacific Strategy over the longer term (to be fair, as many others in Southeast Asia and elsewhere do), and whether the United States can be counted on to assist Vietnam in a future military engagement or regional crisis. Nothing within the strategy report can answer these questions, and thus it is incumbent on defense and military officials to constantly and persuasively convince their Vietnamese counterparts that Washington is planning to remain a Pacific power that is ready to assist Hanoi, even within certain limits. Additionally, because the strategy is a product of the U.S. Department of Defense and not the broader U.S. government, it suggests a heavy emphasis on military options to address exclusively security-related challenges. Instead, Hanoi would almost certainly like to see a more comprehensive strategy that encompasses economic challenges as well. Signing a new FTA with Vietnam, for example, could go a long way toward answering lingering questions about what a post-TPP-withdrawal United States plans to do in the Indo-Pacific, especially as China’s BRI continues to ascend regionally and globally.

Vietnamese interlocutors would also likely want to see more on U.S. plans for broader Indochina. Although both Cambodia and Laos are mentioned in the Indo-Pacific Strategy, Vietnam will want to learn more details of the strategy in these countries, especially in light of

³¹¹ U.S. Department of Defense, 2019b, pp. 36–37.

³¹² The Indo-Pacific Strategy also talks about nontraditional military cooperation with Vietnam in sections titled “Maritime Security Initiative: Year Four” and “Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI)”; see U.S. Department of Defense, 2019b, pp. 49 and 51.

recent reports that China plans to build naval and air bases in Cambodia. This issue will likely take on greater significance in the future.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy also discusses Vietnam in the section titled “Emerging Intra-Asian Security Relationships.”³¹³ The authors of the strategy are clearly happy with Vietnam’s elevation in defense and security ties to U.S. allies and partners, including Australia, Japan, and India. Although these activities are encouraging, Washington should avoid pressuring Hanoi to incorporate them into multilateral arrangements, such as the Quad or other multilateral mechanisms, involving the United States. The Three No’s defense policy probably makes these interactions a bridge too far. Vietnamese officials may nevertheless be willing to participate in a Track 1.5 or Track 2 (semiofficial or unofficial dialogues, respectively) format or as a “plus one” that minimizes its exposure to blowback from Beijing. Notably, as mentioned above, the Quad Plus coronavirus response does include Vietnam. Either way, the United States should continue to work with and through its allies and partners to find areas of complementarity in key objectives to avoid duplication of effort in Vietnam. For example, Japan, India, and increasingly South Korea support Hanoi’s maritime security objectives. Australia does as well, and it additionally supports Vietnam’s PKO, professional military education (PME), and even special forces goals. Tokyo is also active in the SAR, HA/DR, and maritime law enforcement domains. Outside the Indo-Pacific, the United Kingdom might be leveraged as well for its English-language training, PKO, and PME services.

Beyond the Indo-Pacific Strategy, collaboration between Washington and Hanoi has improved markedly since the lifting of the lethal weapons ban in 2016. The two sides have engaged in more than 160 security cooperation activities annually, but none has included traditional joint military exercises; Vietnam has allowed only nontraditional activities to occur under the Three No’s defense policy. These engagements regularly focus on HA/DR, SAR, PKO, demining, maritime security (especially through the U.S. Coast Guard), and, more recently, chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear preparedness. Hanoi allows its government officials across the Vietnamese interagency (from MND, MFA, the Ministry of Agriculture, and others, along with provincial-level government agencies) to maximize their billet allowances at U.S. Department of Defense training facilities, such as the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies. Vietnam also enthusiastically sends its officers to attend U.S. war colleges and staff command colleges. These security cooperation engagements underscore that the United States has found viable ways around Vietnam’s Three No’s defense policy by operating within the nontraditional military space of maritime security and disaster preparedness. HA/DR, for example, is considered far less threatening to China within Vietnamese leadership circles, even though such training can have dual-use applicability. Vietnam has clearly welcomed, and the United States is clearly pursuing, these types of nonmilitary opportunities—and both sides should continue to do so.

³¹³ U.S. Department of Defense, 2019b, pp. 49–50.

With such a high number of annual security cooperation activities in place, it is reasonable to wonder whether U.S. concerns over Hanoi's abrupt cancellation of 15 defense and military engagements for fiscal year 2019 were somewhat overblown. As noted, the decision probably amounted, at least in part, to a natural recalibration of Vietnam's national security strategy with China in mind. Additionally, the MND's ability to handle all of its new and deepening security partnerships with Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea, while also maintaining cordial and productive ties to Russia and China, probably presents an acute bandwidth challenge. In short, defense cooperation overall has shown healthy progress despite occasional setbacks.

A specific area of potential growth in the defense relationship is in intelligence exchanges. Clearly, the lack of trust remains a factor, with lingering Vietnamese sensitivities over the war and persistent VCP concerns—stoked by the CCP—that the United States and the West are interested in “peaceful evolution” in Vietnam to overthrow the regime. Although it would be difficult to reach the level of trust that would enable routinized and frequent defense intelligence exchanges at a mutually useful level, finding a way to do so would probably pay significant dividends for U.S.-Vietnam relations going forward. This would be especially true if intelligence on China were shared. The two sides should look to establish a General Security of Military Information Agreement as a solid first step in this direction.

Finally, despite the lifting of the U.S. ban on lethal arms procurements in 2016, Hanoi will struggle to capitalize on the opportunity. As this analysis demonstrates, the VPA has a variety of challenges, including affordability, interoperability, maintenance, and training, that will complicate receiving arms from Washington for the foreseeable future. However, the United States has found other ways of sending military equipment to Vietnam, including in the maritime security and MDA spaces. Washington's sale of the ScanEagle 2 drone and ex-*Hamilton* class coast guard cutter to Vietnam are good examples of this cooperation. Perhaps the more alarming challenge here is the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).³¹⁴ Russia continues to serve as Vietnam's top arms sale provider, and the overwhelming majority of VPA equipment is Russian or Soviet-era. But Hanoi is yet to secure a waiver from the Pentagon on the act, making future arms purchases from Moscow a potential sanctions trigger that could negatively affect deepening U.S.-Vietnam defense exchanges.

Implications for the U.S. Air Force

I conclude with a few thoughts here that apply specifically to the USAF and PACAF.³¹⁵ USAF cooperation with Vietnam's VAD-AF has encountered both successes and challenges. On the successful end of the spectrum, the PACAF commander visited Vietnam in 2019, marking

³¹⁴ Pub. L. 115-44, Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, July 27, 2017.

³¹⁵ This section is heavily informed by discussions with USAF personnel.

the first time a USAF chief had visited the country since the end of the Vietnam War.³¹⁶ Separately, the VAD-AF in June 2019 graduated its first student ever, Capt. Toai Dang, from the U.S. Aviation Leadership Program (ALP).³¹⁷ ALP currently has two other Vietnamese students in training, meaning that Hanoi possesses three of the available ten ALP slots worldwide—a remarkable statistic underscoring the growing closeness of USAF-VAD-AF ties and overall U.S.-Vietnam defense exchanges. Vietnam also has one slot at the Air Command Staff College, and the USAF recently awarded another for 2020.

These international military education and training opportunities have been greatly facilitated by receiving Vietnamese students who are already proficient in English. Aviation training nevertheless includes 12–18 months of English-language training. The appetite for English-language training across the board in Vietnam is truly enormous, and the USAF would like to capitalize on this momentum by establishing its own English training facility in Hanoi. Aviation training directly benefits the USAF, as pilot operations and commands are entirely in English. Australia also has a robust English-language training program for Vietnamese students that complements U.S. and other partner activities (both India and Japan use English to communicate with Vietnam).

Proposed USAF training with VAD-AF through the T-6 training program has been hailed by both sides as a positive step. However, VAD-AF's interest in procuring T-6s will have to go through a potentially lengthy and bureaucratic process of approval from the MND and then by the VCP's Politburo. Regardless, aviation security training is clearly an imperative, as the VAD-AF in June 2019 lost a YAK-52, one of its own trainers.³¹⁸ Unfortunately, the VPA has a history of losing aircraft, and questions justifiably surround its ability to safely train on these platforms and sufficiently maintain them. This is especially true as the VAD-AF must increasingly venture out over water to defend Hanoi's disputed claims in the SCS, possibly against the PLAAF and the rest of the PLA.

Vietnam may be ready to move beyond dual-use HA/DR training and into other, more-traditional operational areas, such as maintenance, sustainment, safety, and logistics. Any of these categories individually, or in combination, would certainly strengthen air force service-to-service exchanges, as well as the broader U.S.-Vietnam defense relationship. Indeed, they represent the next tier of cooperative activities in the defense domain. One area that might be particularly lucrative is institutional capacity building within the VAD-AF. Although likely a very sensitive area, institutional capacity building might be possible under the auspices of the Oregon Air National Guard. The Oregon National Guard has had a state partnership relationship with Vietnam since 2012.

³¹⁶ Office of International Media Engagement, U.S. Department of State, email to author, December 6, 2019.

³¹⁷ Christopher Gross, "First Vietnamese Student Graduates from U.S. Aviation Leadership Program," U.S. Air Force, June 6, 2019.

³¹⁸ "Military Aircraft Crashes in Central Vietnam, Two Killed," *VNExpress International*, June 14, 2019.

Nevertheless, the challenges to enhanced air-to-air relations are formidable. First, the MND must sign off on all service-to-service engagements, and it very likely lacks the bandwidth required to sustain a high number of engagements with both the United States and other partners. This has certainly affected air force-to-air force cooperation. For example, joint aviation training at Cam Ranh Air Base, which is part of the five-year bilateral defense plan, was postponed in 2019 until the next fiscal year. The MND has also canceled four of seven meetings for Pacific Angel—a regional HA/DR exercise held annually since 2008 and led by PACAF. Second, it is difficult for the USAF to effectively communicate with VAD-AF counterparts, as the Vietnamese typically become overly secretive in these engagements. This is probably in part because of lingering Vietnam War suspicions but also in large part because of Russian systems, such as the Su-30, making up the backbone of the VAD-AF. Hanoi probably wishes to prevent the United States from reporting back on the details of these weapons and certainly would not want Moscow to find out that Americans are getting close to them. And, finally, Hanoi's unwillingness to move much beyond training for nontraditional military operations precludes the VAD-AF's participation in traditional warfighting exercises, such as RED FLAG-Alaska (joint offensive counterair, interdiction, close air support, and large force employment).

For these reasons, the USAF should expect only incremental progress in air force-to-air force engagements going forward. But the USAF should capitalize on the modest momentum that has been made in spite of these challenges and seek new opportunities derived from improving U.S.-Vietnam defense relations.

Findings and Recommendations

I offer several key findings and recommendations for the U.S. government at large, the joint force, and the USAF and PACAF to consider:

- First, the framework analysis demonstrates that the United States maintains an edge in the security domain but is behind China in the economic indicators and roughly even, albeit with a slight advantage, on the political and diplomatic side. This is, therefore, not a very strong case for Vietnam “choosing” the United States over China. In fact, Vietnam is far more likely to seek balance in its relations with the United States and China. Washington should thus consider allowing its relationship with Hanoi to unfold organically—i.e., allow members of the VCP leadership to arrive at their own conclusions about Chinese behavior and the need to favor Washington. Stating or otherwise implying that Hanoi must make a choice as U.S.-China competition heats up is likely to be only counterproductive to the relationship.
- Second, like many countries in the region, Vietnam is skeptical that the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy is sustainable over time and that it can effectively deter China from future assertiveness in the SCS. The United States should consider deepening and routinizing interactions with Vietnamese counterparts, prioritizing quality over quantity to avoid any bandwidth challenges. Doing so should go a long way toward convincing Hanoi that Washington will be a Pacific power for the foreseeable future that is ready to assist against Beijing.

- Third, beyond the SCS issue, Vietnam would like the United States to focus on the corrosive effects that China's BRI is having on its neighbors in Indochina, which directly affect Vietnam. Vietnam worries that Cambodia and Laos are increasingly becoming beholden to China, in effect eroding Vietnam's special relationship with these nations. The United States should show a commitment to competing with BRI to help Vietnam avoid encirclement by pro-China countries. Relatedly, deeper U.S. commitment to combating the negative environmental impacts of BRI in these countries, especially because of Chinese dam construction along the Mekong River, would be of particular interest.
- Fourth, the United States should continue to work with and through its allies and partners to find areas of complementarity in key objectives to avoid duplication of effort in Vietnam. For example, Japan, India, and increasingly South Korea support Vietnam's maritime security objectives. Australia does so as well, and Canberra additionally supports Vietnam's PKO, PME, and even special forces goals. Japan is also active in the domains of SAR, HA/DR, and maritime law enforcement. Within and outside the Indo-Pacific, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom might be leveraged for their English-language training, PKO, and PME services.
- Fifth, and finally, in senior-level visits with the MND, the USAF should press for service-to-service cooperation to become routine to minimize the chance of future disruptions. The USAF should also look for opportunities to build the VAD-AF's institutional capacity, particularly its support functions, including maintenance, sustainment, and safety activities, which are more likely to produce durable gains. And because of VAD-AF sensitivities while on a military base because of the Three No's defense policy, perhaps the USAF could suggest that cooperative activities take place in other nonmilitary locations.

Appendix

This report is part of a series of country studies that assess the competition for influence in these nations between China and the United States. The main report, *Regional Responses to U.S.-China Competition in the Indo-Pacific: Study Overview and Conclusions*, presents a detailed explanation of a RAND-developed analytic framework for evaluating which competitor, China or the United States, maintains the most influence in a given third country.³¹⁹ To offer readers of this Vietnam report additional details on the framework, Table A.1 briefly explains the color coding of the RAND framework variables. The rest of the appendix presents the sources that supported the framework’s variables.

Table A.1. Color Coding of Framework Variables

Variable	Coding
Diplomatic and political	
Diplomatic and political ties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue: Partner has significantly closer diplomatic ties with the United States than China and prioritizes its relationship with the United States. • Light blue: Partner has slightly closer diplomatic ties with the United States than China and places relatively more priority on ties with the United States. • Gray: Partner has similar diplomatic ties with the United States and China and attaches similar weight to relations with the United States and China. • Light red: Partner has slightly closer diplomatic ties with China than the United States and places relatively more priority on ties with China. • Red: Partner has significantly closer diplomatic ties with China than the United States and prioritizes its relationship with China.
Support for U.S. versus Chinese vision for the region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue: Partner views the U.S. vision for the region as highly aligned with its own interests and is concerned that China’s vision undermines its interests. • Light blue: Partner views the U.S. vision for the region as generally more aligned with its own interests than China’s visions. • Gray: Partner views both visions as similarly aligned with its interests, or the partner views neither vision as aligned with its interests. • Light red: Partner views the Chinese vision for the region as generally more aligned with its own interests than the U.S. vision. • Red: Partner views the Chinese vision for the region as highly aligned with its own interests and is concerned that the U.S. vision undermines its interests.
Views of U.S. commitment to the region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue: Partner is very confident that the United States will remain committed to the region and will at least maintain its current level of attention to the region, and partner can rely on the United States. • Light blue: Partner is cautiously optimistic that the United States will remain committed to the region and will likely maintain its current level of attention to the region; and partner can rely on the United States. • Gray: Partner is uncertain whether the United States will remain committed to the region, is uncertain that the United States will maintain its current level of attention to the region, and is uncertain that it can rely on the United States.

³¹⁹ Lin et al., 2020.

Variable	Coding
Public opinion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Light red: Partner is relatively pessimistic that the United States will remain committed to the region, believes that the United States will have difficulty maintaining attention toward the region, and does not believe that it can rely on the United States. • Red: Partner does not believe that the United States is committed to the region, believes that the United States is likely to decrease its attention to the region, and does not believe that it can rely on the United States. • Blue: Partner public opinion significantly favors the United States over China by more than 20 percent. • Light blue: Partner public opinion slightly favors the United States over China by 3 percent to 20 percent. • Gray: Partner public opinion has similar favorability views of the United States and China. • Light red: Partner public opinion slightly favors China over the United States by 3 percent to 20 percent. • Red: Partner public opinion significantly favors China over the United States by more than 20 percent.
Economic	
<i>Economic dependence</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue: Partner is significantly dependent on trade, investment, and (to a lesser extent) tourism from the United States, compared with China (more than 20 percent). • Light blue: Partner is moderately more dependent on trade, investment, and (to a lesser extent) tourism from the United States, compared with China (3 percent to 20 percent). • Gray: Partner is similarly dependent on trade, investment, and (to a lesser extent) tourism from the United States, compared with China. • Light red: Partner is moderately more dependent on trade, investment, and (to a lesser extent) tourism from China, compared to the United States (3 percent to 20 percent). • Red: Partner is significantly dependent on trade, investment, and (to a lesser extent) tourism from China, compared with the United States (more than 20 percent).
<i>Economic opportunity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue: Partner strongly believes that it will depend more on trade and investments with the United States than China in the next 10–15 years. • Light blue: Partner believes that it is likely to depend more on trade and investments with the United States than China in the next 10–15 years. • Gray: Partner believes that it is likely to depend as much on the United States as on China for trade and investment in the next 10–15 years. • Light red: Partner believes that it is likely to depend more on trade and investments with China than the United States in the next 10–15 years. • Red: Partner strongly believes that it will depend more on trade and investments with China than the United States in the next 10–15 years.
<i>Threat perceptions of the United States versus China (economic)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue: Partner has significant concerns regarding U.S. economic influence and views U.S. economic strength as threatening, subversive, or coercive. • Light blue: Partner has some, but limited, concerns regarding U.S. economic influence and views U.S. economic strength as threatening, subversive, or coercive. • Gray: Partner does not view the United States and China as economic threats or has equal concerns about negative U.S. and Chinese economic influence. • Light red: Partner has some, but limited, concerns regarding Chinese economic influence and views Chinese economic strength as threatening, subversive, or coercive. • Red: Partner has significant concerns regarding Chinese economic influence and views Chinese economic strength as threatening, subversive, or coercive.

Variable	Coding
Willingness to work with the United States versus China based on economic threat perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue: Partner seeks to work with the United States to counter or mitigate assessed Chinese economic threats and has taken significant measures to reduce economic dependency on China. • Light blue: Partner seeks greater economic cooperation with the United States and has taken some measures to limit or reduce Chinese economic influence in key economic sectors. • Gray: Partner seeks greater economic cooperation with the United States and China and seeks economic diversification to avoid overdependence on either country. • Light red: Partner seeks greater economic cooperation with China and has taken some measures to limit or reduce U.S. economic influence in key economic sectors. • Red: Partner seeks to work with China to counter or balance against assessed U.S. economic threat and has taken significant measures to reduce economic dependency on the United States.
Military and security	
<i>Threat perceptions of the United States versus China (military)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue: Partner views the United States as a significant military or security threat. • Light blue: Partner views the United States as a limited military or security threat. • Gray: Partner does not view the United States and China as military or security threats or has equal concerns about both countries. • Light red: Partner views China as a limited military or security threat. • Red: Partner views China as a significant military or security threat.
Willingness to work with the United States versus China based on military threat perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue: Partner seeks increased cooperation with the United States to balance against assessed Chinese military or security threat and has taken actions to directly or indirectly balance against China's military strength. • Light blue: Partner seeks increased cooperation with the United States to strengthen its own military capabilities, has taken some measures to address perceived Chinese military threat, and is cautious of directly balancing against China. • Gray: Partner seeks more military cooperation with the United States and China or partner's willingness to militarily cooperate with the United States or China is not driven by U.S. or China military threat perceptions. • Light red: Partner seeks increased cooperation with China to strengthen its own military capabilities; has taken some measures to address perceived U.S. military threat and is cautious of directly balancing against the United States. • Red: Partner seeks increased cooperation with China to balance against assessed U.S. military or security threat and has taken actions to directly or indirectly balance against U.S. military strength.
Support for major U.S.-led security efforts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue: Partner has participated or supported many key U.S.-led international and regional security efforts. • Light blue: Partner has participated or supported some U.S.-led international and regional security efforts. • Gray: Partner has shown limited or no support to U.S.-led international and regional security efforts. • Light red: Partner has opposed some U.S.-led international and regional security efforts. • Red: Partner has opposed many U.S.-led international or regional security efforts.
<i>Military cooperation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue: Partner has significantly closer military ties with the United States than China and engages in significantly more military activities and cooperation with the United States. • Light blue: Partner has slightly closer military ties with the United States than China and engages in moderately more military activities and cooperation with the United States.

Variable	Coding
<i>U.S. versus Chinese military capability</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gray: Partner has similar military ties with the United States and China and attaches similar weight to defense and security cooperation with the United States and China. • Light red: Partner has slightly closer military ties with China than the United States and engages in moderately more military activities and cooperation with China. • Red: Partner has significantly closer military ties with China than the United States and engages in significantly more military activities and cooperation with China.
Perception of U.S. willingness to aid Vietnam in conflict with China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue: Partner believes that the United States currently has a significant military advantage over China in terms of military capabilities. • Light blue: Partner believes that the United States currently has a modest military advantage over China in terms of military capabilities. • Gray: Partner believes that the United States and China have similar military capabilities. • Light red: Partner believes that China currently has a modest military advantage over the United States in terms of military capabilities. • Red: Partner believes that China currently has a significant military advantage over the United States in terms of military capabilities.
Perception of U.S. willingness to aid Vietnam in conflict with China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue: Partner is confident that the United States will provide military support or aid if partner becomes involved in a potential military conflict with China. • Light blue: Partner is cautiously optimistic that the United States will provide military support or aid if partner becomes involved in a potential military conflict with China. • Gray: Partner is uncertain whether the United States will provide military support or aid if partner becomes involved in a potential military conflict with China. • Light red: Partner is pessimistic that that the United States will provide military support or aid if partner becomes involved in a potential military conflict with China. • Red: Partner does not believe that the United States will provide military support or aid if partner becomes involved in a potential military conflict with China.

NOTE: Variables measuring shared interests are roman, and variables measuring relative capability are italicized.

Variable: Diplomatic and Political Ties

- **Coding method:** Researchers coded based on interviews and analysis.
- **Data sources in addition to interviews:** academic and policy literature, official and unofficial Vietnamese policy statements in English (on government websites, the state-run press, or elsewhere), and Vietnamese-language primary sources on Vietnam’s security policy, including Vietnam’s defense journals, the VCP’s journal, leadership speeches, state-run media, think tank papers, government statements, and social media and blog postings.
- **Notes:** The report does not use United Nations voting as an indicator of diplomatic interests. U.S. interests go beyond issues voted on at the United Nations. Countries vote on a variety of issues in the United Nations that are not of equal strategic importance to the United States. Among the subset of United Nations votes that the U.S. Department of State categorizes as important for the United States, a good proportion relates to Israel and Palestine, and the majority of the issues relate to general development or foreign policy concerns that are not specific to security issues in the Indo-Pacific. In 2017, for

example, among the State Department–identified important United Nations votes, there was only one vote—the situation of human rights in Burma—out of 27 votes that was specific to the Indo-Pacific.

Variable: Support for U.S. Versus Chinese Vision in the Region

- **Coding method:** Researchers coded based on interviews and data from various polling sources.
- **Data source in addition to interviews:** Tang Siew Mun, Moe Thuzar, Hoang Thi Ha, Termsak Chalermpanupap, Pham Thi Phuong Thao, and Anuthida Saelaow Qian, *The State of Southeast Asia: 2019 Survey Report*, Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019.

Variable: Views of U.S. Commitment to the Region

- **Coding method:** Researchers coded based on interviews and data from various polling sources.
- **Data sources in addition to interviews:** Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Opinion Poll on Japan in ASEAN Countries,” March 2019; Tang Siew Mun, Moe Thuzar, Hoang Thi Ha, Termsak Chalermpanupap, Pham Thi Phuong Thao, and Anuthida Saelaow Qian, *The State of Southeast Asia: 2019 Survey Report*, Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019.

Variable: Public Opinion

- **Coding method:** Researchers coded based on interviews and polling data on whether Vietnam has favorable views of the United States or China. The calculations used U.S. favorability (percentage) minus Chinese favorability (percentage).
- **Data sources in addition to interviews:** Pew Research Center, Global Indicators Database, “Opinion of the United States,” accessed August 2018; Tang Siew Mun, Moe Thuzar, Hoang Thi Ha, Termsak Chalermpanupap, Pham Thi Phuong Thao, and Anuthida Saelaow Qian, *The State of Southeast Asia: 2019 Survey Report*, Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019; Yun-han Chu, Yu-tzung Chang, and Min-hua Huang, “How East Asians View the Influence of United States vs. a Rising China,” Hu Fu Center for East Asia Democratic Studies, National Taiwan University, 2016; Wan Saiful Wan Jan, “Malaysians’ Response to Big China Presence Shows Concerns,” *Straits Times*, April 27, 2017; Boo Su-Lyn, “Malaysians More Positive About China Now, Studies Show,” *Malay Mail*, April 1, 2017; Johannes Herlijanto, *Public Perceptions of China in Indonesia: The Indonesia National Survey*, Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, December 4, 2017a; Bruce Stokes, Dorothy Manevich, and Hanyu Chwe, “India and the World,” Pew Research Center, November 15, 2017; Johannes Herlijanto, “Public Perceptions of China in Indonesia: The Indonesia National Survey,” *Belt and Road*, December 5, 2017b; Globe Scan, “Sharp Drop in World Views of US, UK: Global Poll,” July 4, 2017.

Variable: Economic Dependence

- **Coding method:** Researchers coded based on 65 percent trade (the difference in Vietnam's trade with the United States versus China), 20 percent inward FDI (the difference in the United States versus Chinese FDI into Vietnam), 10 percent outward FDI (the difference in Vietnam's FDI in the United States versus Vietnam's FDI in China), and 5 percent tourism (the difference in U.S. tourism to Vietnam versus Chinese tourism to Vietnam). Five percent is reflective of the economic importance of tourism to regional countries.
- **Data sources in addition to interviews:** Researchers used the most recent data available (2017 or 2018) to examine trade relationships China and the United States have with third countries. Researchers used U.S. sources for U.S. FDI and partner FDI in the United States and Chinese sources for Chinese FDI and partner FDI in China. United Nations, UN Comtrade Database, accessed December 20, 2019; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, *World Investment Report 2018: Investment and New Industrial Policies*, Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations Publications, 2018; Bureau of Economic Analysis, "Direct Investment by Country and Industry, 2018," webpage, last updated July 31, 2019; Bureau of Economic Analysis, "Foreign Direct Investment in the U.S.: Balance of Payments and Direct Investment Position Data," webpage, last updated March 19, 2020; Chinese Ministry of Commerce, *2017 Statistical Bulletin of China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment*, Beijing, October 2018.

Variable: Economic Opportunity

- **Coding method:** Researchers coded based on projected U.S. and Chinese economic growth rates and interviews.
- **Data sources in addition to interviews:** U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis; China Global Investment Tracker; International Monetary Fund World Economic Outlook; Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index; Chinese Ministry of Commerce; PricewaterhouseCoopers, *The Long View: How Will the Global Economic Order Change by 2050?* London, February 2017; Lowy Institute, *Asia Power Index 2019*, Sydney, Australia, 2019; "The World's Economic Powerhouses Are Going to Look Very Different in Another Decade," News.com.au, January 20, 2019; Will Martin, "The U.S. Could Lose Its Crown as the World's Most Powerful Economy as Soon as Next Year, and It's Unlikely to Ever Get It Back," *Business Insider*, January 10, 2019; Janet Henry, "The World in 2030," HSBC, September 28, 2019.

Variable: Threat Perceptions of the United States Versus China (Economic)

- **Coding method:** Researchers coded based on interviews, literature review, and polling data.
- **Data sources in addition to interviews:** Tang Siew Mun, Moe Thuzar, Hoang Thi Ha, Termsak Chalermphanupap, Pham Thi Phuong Thao, and Anuthida Saclaow Qian, *The State of Southeast Asia: 2019 Survey Report*, Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019; Natasha Kassam, "Lowy Institute Poll 2019," Lowy Institute, June 26, 2019.

Variable: Willingness to Work with the United States Versus China Based on Economic Threat Perceptions

- **Coding method:** Researchers coded based on interviews and literature review.
- **Data sources in addition to interviews:** Tang Siew Mun, Moe Thuzar, Hoang Thi Ha, Termsak Chalernpalanupap, Pham Thi Phuong Thao, and Anuthida Saelaow Qian, *The State of Southeast Asia: 2019 Survey Report*, Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019; Natasha Kassam, “Lowy Institute Poll 2019,” Lowy Institute, June 26, 2019.

Variable: Threat Perceptions of the United States Versus China (Military)

- **Coding method:** Researchers coded based on interviews, literature review, and polling data.
- **Data sources in addition to interviews:** Tang Siew Mun, Moe Thuzar, Hoang Thi Ha, Termsak Chalernpalanupap, Pham Thi Phuong Thao, and Anuthida Saelaow Qian, *The State of Southeast Asia: 2019 Survey Report*, Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019; Natasha Kassam, “Lowy Institute Poll 2019,” Lowy Institute, June 26, 2019.

Variable: Willingness to Work with the United States Versus China Based on Military Threat Perceptions

- **Coding method:** Researchers coded based on interviews and literature review.
- **Data sources in addition to interviews:** Tang Siew Mun, Moe Thuzar, Hoang Thi Ha, Termsak Chalernpalanupap, Pham Thi Phuong Thao, and Anuthida Saelaow Qian, *The State of Southeast Asia: 2019 Survey Report*, Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019; Natasha Kassam, “Lowy Institute Poll 2019,” Lowy Institute, June 26, 2019.

Variable: Support for Major U.S.-Led Security Efforts

- **Coding method:** Researchers coded an aggregate of data collected on how regional countries support or participate in U.S.-led international or regional initiatives: If countries supported major U.S. efforts related to North Korea, including efforts to disrupt North Korean ship-to-ship transfers; participated in SCS patrols, operations, or major exercises with the United States in SCS international waters; engaged in Taiwan Strait transits; supported U.S. FONOPs; participated in major U.S.-led military operations (Operation Enduring Freedom, International Security Assistance Force, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Inherent Resolve); and participated in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.
- **Data sources in addition to interviews:** Various articles from the Council on Foreign Relations, *The Diplomat*, Reuters, *The Guardian*, BBC, *Japan Times*, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, and foreign ministry websites.

Variable: Military Cooperation

- **Coding method:** Researchers coded an aggregate of six measures: if the United States or China has a major military base or facility in the country; relative U.S. versus Chinese arms sales to Vietnam; whether Vietnam has acquisition and cross-servicing agreements with the United States versus a similar agreement with China; whether Vietnam has defense coproduction and codevelopment agreements with the United States, compared with similar agreements with China; whether Vietnam has an information-sharing agreement with the United States, compared with a similar agreement with China; and how much the Vietnamese militarily trains and exercises with the United States, compared with China.
- **Data sources in addition to interviews:** Kenneth W. Allen, John Chen, and Phillip Charles Saunders, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016: Trends and Implications*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2017; Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win*, Washington, D.C., 2019; U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Department of State, *Fiscal Years 2017 and 2018 Joint Report to Congress*, Vol. 1, Washington, D.C., Foreign Military Training Report F-685A5A8, November 27, 2017a; U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Department of State, *Fiscal Years 2017 and 2018 Joint Report to Congress*, Vol. 2: *Country Training Activities*, Washington, D.C., Foreign Military Training Report F-685A5A8, November 27, 2017b; U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Department of State, *Fiscal Years 2018 and 2019 Joint Report to Congress*, Vol. 1, Washington, D.C., Foreign Military Training Report 2-C52504A, March 13, 2019a; U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Department of State, *Fiscal Years 2018 and 2019 Joint Report to Congress*, Vol. 2: *Country Training Activities*, Washington, D.C., Foreign Military Training Report 2-C52504A, March 13, 2019b; U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2019*, Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, E-1F4B924, May 2, 2019a; U.S. Department of Defense, *Assessment on U.S. Defense Implications of China’s Expanding Global Access*, Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 6-6B48CD8, December 20, 2018b; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, accessed July 10, 2019; State Council of the People’s Republic of China, *The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces*, Beijing, 2013; State Council of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Military Strategy*, Beijing, 2015; State Council of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation*, Beijing, 2017; State Council of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Foreign Aid*, Beijing, 2014; International Acquisition Management, “Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) Countries and Organizations List,” briefing slides, Fort Belvoir, Va.: Defense Acquisition University, December 2014.

Variable: U.S. Versus Chinese Military Capability

- **Coding method:** Researchers coded based on comparisons of current U.S. versus Chinese military capability and regional interviews.

- **Data sources in addition to interviews:** Lowy Institute, *Asia Power Index 2019*, Sydney, Australia, 2019; International Institute for Strategic Studies, “Asia,” in *The Military Balance 2019*, London, 2019, pp. 222–319.

Variable: Perception of U.S. Willingness to Aid Vietnam in Conflict with China

- **Coding method:** Researchers coded based on interviews, literature review, and polling data.
- **Data sources in addition to interviews:** Stafford Nichols and Zacc Ritter, “U.S. Defense Promise Still Credible in Asia-Pacific,” Gallup, July 17, 2018; Tang Siew Mun, Moe Thuzar, Hoang Thi Ha, Termsak Chalermpanupap, Pham Thi Phuong Thao, and Anuthida Saelaow Qian, *The State of Southeast Asia: 2019 Survey Report*, Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019.

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Vietnam is arguably one of the most important partners for the United States in the Indo-Pacific region. Vietnam embodies the “free and open” values of the White House’s Indo-Pacific Strategy because Hanoi seeks to preserve its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence in the face of China’s increasingly intrusive economic and military power. Vietnam is deeply concerned about the long-term geostrategic implications of China’s Belt and Road Initiative and is standing up to Beijing’s territorial claims and the growing assertiveness of the People’s Liberation Army in the South China Sea.

The author leverages a framework that RAND developed for a seven-part series on regional responses to U.S.-China competition, with this report focusing on Vietnam’s perspective. Both Beijing and Washington have pressure points on Hanoi—diplomatic and political, economic, and security and military. The report evaluates how Hanoi is responding to these influence variables, especially as U.S.-China competition grows fiercer across the Indo-Pacific and globally. Understanding this requires analyzing Vietnam’s security policy and domestic politics and political, economic, and security ties to the United States and China. Finally, the author discusses the prospects of achieving enhanced U.S.-Vietnam relations to counter rising Chinese coercion in the future, with an eye toward the specific needs of the U.S. Air Force. The research draws on a range of primary and secondary sources in both English and Vietnamese, data sets, and interviews conducted in English that occurred primarily in April 2019.

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