

Understanding the U.S.–Vietnam Security Relationship, 2011–2017

Dang Cam Tu and Hang Thi Thuy Nguyen *

Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, Hanoi, Vietnam

This paper seeks to explore the new dynamics of U.S.–Vietnam security relations from 2011 to 2017. It begins with a review of the attempts before 2011 to establish a foundation for a normal security relationship between the United States and Vietnam, and progresses in the scope and pace of the bilateral relationship in this field. The paper then examines the process of a deepening security relationship between the two countries from 2011 to 2017, focusing on the motivations for increased security cooperation and the developments in five main areas of cooperation, namely maritime security, high-level dialogues, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and peacekeeping operations. Finally, this paper looks at the potential and limits of the U.S.–Vietnam security relationship, analyzing the possibilities for building a more balanced and effective security relationship and the limitations of U.S.–Vietnam security cooperation. In conclusion, the authors argue that the years from 2011 to 2017 witnessed new and positive moves in the U.S.–Vietnam security relationship. This is a highly significant development for Vietnam and the United States and an illustration of the fast geostrategic change underway in the Asia–Pacific region in the post–Cold War.

Keywords: Vietnam, United States, security relationship, South China Sea, China

Introduction

The history of international relations suggests that it takes time to normalize the relationship between warring states. Yet, it was extraordinary that the United States and Vietnam could in merely two decades break down the barriers that were created by 30 years of hostility to not only move towards reconciliation but also to build the mechanisms and measures necessary to ensure the maturation of a close and mutually beneficial security relationship. Between 2011 and 2017, the United States and Vietnam

* E-mail: dangcamtu.dav@gmail.com; hangnguyen@dav.edu.vn

advanced their security relationship by strengthening military-to-military interactions, making concerted efforts to realize their joint vision on security cooperation and pursuing new areas of collaboration with a particular concentration on maritime security, high-level dialogues, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and peacekeeping operations. Vietnam and the United States have worked more closely with one another than ever before to gain and sustain momentum in their security cooperation.

The contribution of this paper is four-fold. Firstly, moving beyond conventional wisdom, the paper enriches existing research by demonstrating that the U.S.–Vietnam security relationship is unparalleled. Rarely in the history of warfare have two enemies transformed into promising security partners so rapidly. Secondly, it explores the set of motivations for the United States and Vietnam to deepen and broaden their security cooperation in the 2011–2017 period. Thirdly, it examines and evaluates developments in the five areas of security cooperation by mining various sources, including newly-declassified documents and scholarly writings. Lastly, it provides an analysis of the potential and limiting factors which make U.S.–Vietnam security cooperation so promising but not yet fulfilling.

U.S.–Vietnam Security Relationship prior to 2011

The years from 1995 to 2010 witnessed incremental progress in U.S.–Vietnam relations in general and in security ties in particular. As part of the growing relations between the United States and Vietnam, their security cooperation has been cultivated and expanding. This period can be divided into two phases in which phase 1 (1995–2000) was the time when both sides cautiously explored each other to establish initial military contact, and phase 2 (2001–2010) was the time when they began to interact with each other more frequently and mostly focused on areas of non-traditional security, personnel exchanges and military education.

1995–2000: Initiating Military Contact

The Vietnam War was a tragedy for both Vietnamese and Americans. At least two million Vietnamese and more than 58,000 American soldiers lost their lives. Many others were injured, and many Vietnamese have been victimized mostly from land mines and other types of unexploded ordnance.¹ Though the Vietnam War ended in 1975, its lingering wounds could be felt in both Vietnam and the United States for years.² It was not until the early 1990s that the reconciliatory efforts began to bring about initial outcomes. On June 16, 1995, Patrick Joseph Leahy, a Senator from Vermont, spoke to Congress on the need for the United States to normalize the relationship with Vietnam, and stressed that there should not be any delay in resuming full diplomatic relations with Vietnam.³

This was a reassertion of what Senator John Kerry put forth in 1993: “...there is a convergence of interests at this moment in history” between Vietnam and the United States.⁴

Changes in the aftermath of the Cold War created a favorable context for the improvement of the bilateral relationship. Following the economic and political reforms under *Đổi Mới* (Renovation), launched in December 1986 at the Sixth Party Congress, Vietnam reached out to the regional and world communities, hoping to build better relations with the neighboring countries and major powers.⁵ That Vietnam expressed its interest in joining the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) showed its desire for international integration and its willingness to befriend countries of different political regimes and economic developmental levels. Particularly, Vietnam's decision to completely withdraw its troops from Cambodia in 1989 and its willingness to cooperate with the United States on POW/MIA issues (war/missing in action) encouraged the George H.W. Bush administration to take further steps toward rapprochement with Vietnam.⁶ Meanwhile, the United States could not fail to acknowledge the economic and geo-politic importance of Southeast Asia as pointed out by Senator John Kerry: "...for many decades from that signal moment when Admiral Perry entered Manila Bay through this century, we have had an extraordinary involvement in that region of the world. And as we are involved elsewhere in the world, we must continue to be involved there."⁷ The long-term political stability of Southeast Asia, a region where Vietnam is integral, is in the United States' national interests. Hence, normalizing bilateral relations with Vietnam would further advance various interests of the United States in Southeast Asia.

Along with the process of formal normalization of diplomatic relations, initial military contacts between the United States and Vietnam were established. A U.S. Defense Attaché was officially accredited to Vietnam in December 1995. The first real steps toward the security relationship were "halting, modest, and cautious, revolving around mutually agreed initiatives that were constrained in scope and deliberately low in nature."⁸ It was partly because Vietnam wanted to avoid taking actions that could lead to misinterpretation from its neighbors as embracing the fledgling security cooperation with the United States. Meanwhile, the United States concentrated mostly on economic, trade, consular and, politico–diplomatic normalization. As both sides were approaching each other in an exploratory manner, the scope and pace of their bilateral military engagement were constrained and modest. In 1997, the security relationship between the United States and Vietnam focused tightly on three types of activities, namely cooperation in a multilateral arrangement; high-ranking military visits; and practical cooperation in uncontroversial areas including search and rescue, military medicine, environmental security, and de-mining. For instance, following the visit of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Affairs to Vietnam in November 1996 were a First Air War College group visit to Vietnam and the start of a U.S. Military engineers demining training program in Vietnam. In March 1997, the first Vietnamese Defense Attaché arrived in Washington. Between September 30 to October 2, 1998, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Nguyen Manh Cam made a trip to the Pentagon which was followed by Deputy Minister of National Defense Tran Hanh's visit to the United States in the same month. In 1999, Vietnam also sent its first officers to the Asia–Pacific Center for Security Studies. The March 2000 visit to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City by Secretary of Defense, William Cohen marked a significant achievement in

the U.S.–Vietnam bilateral security relationship. President Bill Clinton’s visit to Vietnam in November 2000 especially established a stronger basis for cooperative activities of bilateral defense. This important progress in the U.S.–Vietnam security relationship was framed in the formal normalization of U.S.–Vietnam diplomatic relations. Though there were constraints in the initial military-to-military contact between the U.S. and Vietnam, two countries finally could find a satisfactory way to gradually come closer to each other. This reflected Washington’s recognition of the importance of Vietnam in its Asia policy and Vietnam’s wish to integrate into the dynamic region of Southeast Asia and interact with the entire world community.

2001–2010: Expanding Dialogue and Contact

During the 2001–2010 period, security cooperation between the United States and Vietnam expanded in terms of the scope, scale and pace. On November 19, 2003, the *USS Vandergrift* warship of the Seventh Fleet of the U.S. Navy arrived at Vietnam’s port for four days, becoming the first U.S. Navy ship to visit Vietnam since 1973.⁹ This port visit was a milestone in the U.S.–Vietnam security relationship as it was the beginning of the U.S. Navy’s annual port visits to Vietnam. The year 2003 also witnessed the Vietnamese Defense Minister General Pham Van Tra’s trip to the United States, the first one by a Defense Minister of Vietnam since the two countries normalized bilateral ties. Tra met with his U.S. counterpart, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and other high-ranking U.S. officials. During this visit, Tra and Rumsfeld discussed regional security interests, the war on terrorism, and military cooperation. They agreed to hold meetings and talks between Defense ministers every three years on an alternating basis, and this marked another step in the improved relations between the two military forces.¹⁰

In 2005, Vietnam and the United States signed a cooperation agreement through International Military Education and Training (IMET). Under this agreement, the United States allowed the sales of non-lethal defense items and services to Vietnam, and Vietnamese officers were allowed to begin English language classes at a military language school in San Antonio in the United States.¹¹

In May 2007, a military delegation headed by U.S. Pacific Command Deputy Commander, Lieutenant General Dan Leaf, visited Hanoi and the Vietnamese Air Force Academy in Nha Trang. During this trip, both sides discussed possibilities for (i) joint search and rescue exercises, (ii) Vietnamese officers to attend U.S. military academies, and (iii) military medicine and information technology training programs. Vietnam also had a request for replacement parts for existing equipment.¹² The Bush administration especially requested a budget of around \$200 million for IMET funding which was double the estimated FY2007 level.¹³ In June 2008, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung paid an official visit to the United States. During the visit, Vietnam and the United States signed an agreement to hold annual high-level dialogues on security and strategic issues at the deputy minister/assistant secretary level. Three months later, in October 2008, the very first Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue between the United States and Vietnam was held in Washington. Since then, this Dialogue has served as a civilian-

led forum including military officials from both sides to discuss bilateral and regional security issues of mutual interest.¹⁴

When the Obama administration came into power, the bilateral defense relations stepped up with many symbolic interactions to strengthen defense consultations. In April 2009, Vietnam's National Defense leaders visited the *USS John D. Stennis* (CVN-74), an aircraft carrier operating in the South China Sea, known as the East Sea in Vietnam. In December 2009, Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh made an official visit to the United States. This was the second visit by a Defense Minister since the end of the Vietnam War. The U.S. media stated that this visit was important as it demonstrated Hanoi and Washington's desire to continue to intensify the bilateral defense relations. Minister Phung Quang Thanh visited the U.S. Pacific Navy Command and met PACOM Commander Robert Willard in Hawaii en route to Washington, D.C.

In the first decade of the 21st century, the United States and Vietnam have expanded their security relationship with a focus on non-traditional security including military training and exchanges that would help the next generation of U.S and Vietnamese military leaders to better understand one another. Regular high-ranking visits contributed to enhancing mutual understanding between two sides. Though there remained caution and hesitation from both Hanoi and Washington, it was widely understood that the United States and Vietnam made real efforts to open the way for more robust security relations. During his visit to Hanoi for the first meeting of the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus ("ADMM-Plus) in October 2010, Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates said:

“...the U.S. military will continue to offer resources and technical expertise to Vietnam as it addresses the same sacred task with respect to its missing. As I mentioned in my remarks at the Vietnam National University this morning, the strong relationship we have today is born of our strict shared efforts to address this and other legacies from the war.... Moving forward, we specifically identified information exchanges, maritime security, search and rescue, peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief as areas in which to grow our collaboration.”¹⁵

In 2010, when Vietnam and the United States celebrated the 15th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations (1995–2010), they had joint military activities, namely the first non-war cooperative training program and a one-week joint navy exercise. In August 2010, Vietnam and the United States held a dialogue on defense policy at the deputy minister/assistant secretary level for the very first time, opening a new era in the security relationship with each other. The defense policy dialogue was the outcome of the agreement inked by Vietnamese Minister of Defense Phung Quang Thanh and U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates to establish a high-level forum for exchanging strategic stances on security issues of mutual concern. The defense policy dialogue marked a milestone in the U.S.–Vietnam security relationship, based on growing mutual trust, understanding and respect for independence and sovereignty.

In the period from 1995 to 2010, Hanoi and Washington worked to leave the difficult past behind, thus slowly paving the way for progress in not only diplomatic relations but also in security relations that were seen as sensitive by analysts and observers. The seed of mutually beneficial security cooperation did sprout and grow in the period from 2000 to 2010. The following section will analyze what motivated Vietnam and the United States to work harder to make their security relations substantive and effective.

Motivations for Enhanced Security Cooperation, 2011–2017

The United States' rebalancing to Asia, Vietnam's continued multilateralization and diversification of its foreign relations, and China's rise are the main factors among others.

Seeking to implement the rebalance to Asia, the Obama administration adopted a range of politico-economic and military activities as part of its larger strategy to reinforce relations with Vietnam. Vietnam's growing geo-strategic and geo-economic importance was surely among the reasons for Washington to cultivate a partnership with Hanoi. Before the 2007–2008 global economic crisis, Vietnam was one of the world's *fastest* growing countries, with its annual GDP growth of about 7 percent. Vietnam's GDP growth rate reached an all-time high of 8.46 percent in 2007.¹⁶ Furthermore, Vietnam has had advantages over other regional countries whose populations have aged and wages have risen. Vietnam has emerged as an attractive investment destination for export-oriented manufacturing. Such high-profile U.S. firms as Intel, Microsoft, Lockheed Martin, and Boeing established new business ventures in Vietnam in 2010.¹⁷ The 2012 U.S. defense strategic guidance, for instance, observes that U.S. economic and security interests are closely associated with developments in Asia. Therefore, as the Obama administration re-evaluated the United States' Asia policy, it saw a necessity to effectively engage with Asia. By emphasizing the significance of U.S. relationships with Asian allies and key partners in the future stability and growth of Asia, the Obama administration wanted to concentrate on not only sustaining existing alliances, which serves as a firm basis for maintaining Asia security, but also expanding U.S. networks of cooperation with emerging partners across Asia to “ensure collective capability and capacity for securing common interests.”¹⁸ Accordingly, developing a security relationship with Vietnam, the most populous nation in mainland Southeast Asia and an increasingly proactive member of ASEAN, will continue to contribute to effective U.S. re-engagement with Asia. In other words, Vietnam has become a more significant nation in the Obama administration's effort to implement U.S. rebalancing to Asia. As U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton underlined, “The Obama administration is prepared to take the U.S.–Vietnam relationship to the next level... We see this relationship not only as important on its own merits, but as part of a strategy aimed at enhancing U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia.”¹⁹

Also, Hanoi has its own motives for seeking increased security ties with Washington. Like the United States, Vietnam sees the inevitable intertwining of economics and

national security, henceforth Hanoi has taken both economics and security into account. Vietnam's export-oriented economy, for example, benefits from a growing relationship with the United States as both a source of foreign direct investment and a massive market for Vietnamese products. U.S.–Vietnam bilateral trade, barely USD 451 million in 1995, had surged to over USD 54 billion by 2017.²⁰ Along with promoting trade and economic ties with the United States, Vietnam seeks to advance the security relationship with Washington as part of its expanding external relations with various nations. As for Vietnam, it is a necessity to continue the policy of “multilateralization and diversification” of its external relations and its strategy of soft balancing between the major powers, especially between China and the United States, to defend its national sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as to accelerate economic development.

Furthermore, an important and often unspoken factor driving Vietnam and the United States closer is their shared concerns over China's rise. In modern politics, China is widely perceived as a potential superpower with its huge population, rapid economic growth rate and massive military expenditure. Chinese scholars have taken China's growing power and influence as the main indicator of China's rise. Categorically, they defined China's rise as a process in which China, with its vast territory, rich resources, population and economy of great size, would develop into a powerful nation. For them, China's rise is not simply about its increasing military might and economic strength, but also about its ability to utilize regional and international resources to increase its influence exponentially in Asia and in the wider world.²¹ China's rapid economic growth, global search for valuable natural resources, and rapid pace and comprehensive scope of military modernization have created a broad range of new challenges for Vietnamese and U.S. leaders.²²

The main area in which Vietnam and the United States share concerns over China's rise is Beijing's growing assertiveness in the disputed waters of the South China Sea. The territorial and maritime dispute in the South China Sea has entered a dangerous new phase since 2011, when China had clashes with both the Philippines and Vietnam in the South China Sea, and when China's new assertiveness in the South China Sea began growing. China claims “indisputable sovereignty” over the nine–dash line, basically a U-shaped area which covers the strategic Paracel and Spratly island chains. China has used its powerful naval might to assert control over the nine–dash line since 2012. Meanwhile, China has conducted massive land reclamation in and militarization of the seven features in the Spratly islands. This now enables China to deploy combat aircrafts and missile launchers to the islands at any time. By asserting its control over the South China Sea, China can use this area as a base to project its power through the Asia–Pacific region.²³

Vietnam, for its part, has overlapping territorial claims with China over the South China Sea. Vietnam is involved more extensively in the dispute with China over sovereignty in the South China Sea than any other claimants. There had been frequent incidents at sea, a few of which led to hostilities and anti-China demonstrations in Vietnam.²⁴ The growing assertiveness of China reflected in its island-building and base-construction activities in the South China Sea²⁵ has raised concerns among many

Vietnamese policymakers. As a result, Hanoi remains vigilant against Beijing's attempts to enforce its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. Beijing's unilateral actions to assert control over the Spratly and Paracel Islands in the South China Sea would have direct and serious impact on Vietnam's security and sovereignty.

Managing relations with China always represents the biggest challenge for Vietnam's overall foreign relations. The relationship between Hanoi and Beijing is a complicated one that is shaped by a power asymmetry, similarity in political system, close economic linkage, geographical proximity, and complicated history which are sometimes referred to as Vietnamese misfortune.²⁶ Living next to this northern giant neighbor, Vietnam has to carry out the strategy of both cooperating and struggling (*vừa hợp tác, vừa đấu tranh*)²⁷ to protect its sovereignty, particularly to preserve its national interests in the South China Sea. From his close observation, Brantly Womack pointed out, "Even at peace the giant is feared because the fateful decision of war or peace is largely in the giant's hand."²⁸ The South China Sea was still a bone of contention between Beijing and Hanoi, despite the establishment of a maritime hotline, the regular discussions on "progress in promoting friendship, political trust, cooperation and cultural exchanges," and on "managing and control disputes, expanding military and security cooperation, and coordinating on global issues" as stated during General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's visit to China in January 2017.²⁹

As for the United States, China's new assertiveness and the multiple encounters with China's ships and aircrafts in the South China Sea area gave rise to greater concerns about maintaining the freedom of navigation and over-flight. Maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea that involve China and Vietnam, and other parties including the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan, are no longer the disputes between faraway claimants over a few rocks and reefs in the ocean that are of little significance to Washington. Indeed, these maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea are understood to have profound implications on the U.S. economic, political and strategic posture in the medium and long run. As it has been argued, what is happening in the South China Sea is closely linked with U.S. interests,³⁰ and whoever intends to disturb the peace in the South China Sea would be considered as a strategic challenger in Washington's view.³¹

With a desire to modernize its armed forces, especially the air force and navy in the context of forging partnerships with a wide range of nations,³² it is natural that Vietnam has made efforts to accelerate the security relationship with the United States. While Vietnam would not expect any direct assistance from the United States in a hypothetical confrontation with China, it would expect to win Washington's support in fields such as diplomacy, economics and defense capacity. The U.S. support for an independent, prosperous and strong Vietnam therefore illustrates the convergence of interests between the two countries.³³

Against this background, the United States and Vietnam see the need to enter a closer relationship with one another, especially in the realm of defense and security. Vietnam is one of the key partners in the Obama administration's rebalancing to Asia. In 2013, the two countries agreed on the mode of comprehensive partnership in which defense

cooperation enjoys greater importance.

China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea is an immediate cause to explain the improvement in defense relations between the two countries. The South China Sea dispute is Hanoi's major security concern especially when it relates to Vietnam's core interests of territorial integrity and national sovereignty. Meanwhile, of vital strategic interest to Washington is the sustaining of the presence and unhindered passage of U.S. military ships and aircrafts in the South China Sea to ensure U.S. power projection in the Asia–Pacific region and maintaining freedom of navigation and overflight in accordance with international law.³⁴ Henceforth, China's rise in general and its assertiveness in the South China Sea in particular draws Vietnam and the United States together.

U.S.–Vietnam Security Cooperation, 2011–2017

Vietnam and the United States signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Advancing Bilateral Defense Cooperation on September 19, 2011, and the Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations in 2015. The two documents serve as the basis for Washington and Hanoi to strengthen mil-to-mil cooperation with a focus on maritime security, high-level dialogues, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and peacekeeping operations. The following section will analyze these five important facets of enhanced defense and security cooperation between the United States and Vietnam from 2011 to 2017.

Maritime Security

Cooperation in the maritime security area is concentrated on capacity building. The U.S. transfer of patrol vessels and provision of maritime defense assistance to Vietnam suggests that the growing depth of U.S.–Vietnam security cooperation in which improving the Vietnam Coast Guard's capacities and performance is a priority. During his visit to Vietnam in 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry announced that the United States would provide Vietnam with USD 18 million “to enhance the capacity of coastal patrol units.”³⁵ In May 2017, the United States delivered six Metal Shark 45-foot Defiant–class patrol boats to the Vietnam Coast Guard in the province of Quang Nam.³⁶ This aid aims to help Vietnam deal more effectively with such issues as anti-piracy, maritime law enforcement, maritime search and rescue, and maritime humanitarian assistance operations within Vietnam's territorial waters and exclusive economic zone. Assistant Secretary of State for political and military affairs, Puneet Talwar, once asserted that the United States cooperated with Vietnam to support the development of the Vietnam Coast Guard, and that the United States “will continue to do that to help improve Vietnam's Coast Guard's capabilities.”³⁷ The partial lift of the United States' lethal arms ban against Vietnam in 2014 and the full lift in 2016 allow Vietnam to purchase U.S. military equipment to protect its maritime sovereignty. The U.S.

Coast Guard transferred a Hamilton-class cutter to the Vietnam Coast Guard in May 2017. With its new name, *CSB8020*, in the Vietnamese military forces, the cutter was expected to be practical support from the United States to enhance the professionalism of the Vietnam Coast Guard. Also, in May 2017, as the first leader from Southeast Asia to visit the White House since Donald Trump became the U.S. President, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc affirmed that Vietnam valued its comprehensive relationship with the United States and expressed interest in purchasing more defense assets and coast guard cutters from the United States.³⁸

Regular port visits to Vietnam by the U.S. Navy are also an indicator of increased mil-to-mil relations. After its first visit to Vietnam in August 2010, the *USS George Washington* visited Vietnam again in August 2011 and October 2012. In these second and third visits, a delegation of the Vietnamese military and government officials were invited to the ship and introduced to its activities and its crew members' daily lives.³⁹ Notably, the U.S. Navy was provided with access to maintenance facilities in Vietnam. Following the contract for a dry cargo ship, the *USNS Richard Byrd* in August 2011 docked for routine maintenance and logistic support ships in Cam Ranh Bay—Vietnam's strategically important South China Sea port. This now has become an almost yearly happening.⁴⁰ In October 2016, the destroyer *USS John S. McCain* and submarine tender *USS Frank Cable* became the first commissioned Navy ships since the Vietnam War to be anchored at Cam Ranh Bay. In July 2017, the United States had the eighth iteration of its Naval Engagement Activity (NEA) with Vietnam. As once noted by the U.S. Pacific Command, "NEA [Naval Engagement Activity] Vietnam has evolved from annual port visits to Da Nang by U.S. Navy ships, which began more than a decade ago, to a multi-day bilateral naval engagement ashore and at sea. Each year the engagement becomes more complex."⁴¹ Similarly, in his remarks on NEA Vietnam, U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam Ted Osius underscored that, "These naval activities underscore the deepening and diverse relationship between the United States and Vietnam."⁴² Noticeably, in 2012 and 2016, Vietnam sent observers to the Rim of the Pacific (RMPAC) military exercise. This is the world's largest international maritime exercise, biennially organized by the United States and its allies and partners in and around the Hawaiian Islands and Southern California. It was estimated that from FY2012 to FY2017, Hanoi received over \$55 million in bilateral State Department-funded security assistance under the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program.⁴³ FMF for Vietnam included \$10.25 million in FY 2017 funding under the Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative (SAMSI) which aims to raise maritime domain awareness, increase the presence of partner countries in their own territorial waters, and support them to preserve the rights and freedoms under the international law of the sea.⁴⁴

Obviously, as maritime cooperation between Vietnam and the United States develops and progresses, they serve both practical and symbolic purposes. But it is important to note that more frequent engagements with each other in the maritime domain are essential for Vietnam and the United States to foster a mutual understanding of their naval systems and operations, hence mutual trust between the two countries. This is a value added to the security and defense relationship. The United States has identified

Vietnam as a “cooperative maritime partner,” and expressed its desire to see Vietnam emerge as a key player in maintaining the existing order in the East Asian seascape.⁴⁵ U.S.–Vietnam maritime cooperative activities mostly concentrated on developing Vietnam’s defensive capabilities, and were part of a gradual and deliberate expansion of U.S. support for Vietnam in the framework of the 2011 MOU. These new developments in the maritime cooperation between the two countries, however, should not be seen merely in association with countering China’s growing assertiveness in the South China Sea as Hanoi and Washington insist that territorial disputes should be settled through peaceful means.⁴⁶

High-level Dialogues

Hanoi and Washington established a number of mil-to-mil dialogue and consultation. These mechanisms served as regular forums for both sides to discuss a wide range of issues in security cooperation. Among the existing mechanisms, the annual Vietnam–U.S. Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue has been an important means to review and guide U.S.–Vietnam security cooperation. The talks at the Vietnam–U.S. Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue mostly focused on non-traditional security issues including non-proliferation, counterterrorism, counter-narcotics, POW–MIA accounting, dioxin and Agent Orange, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.⁴⁷ The Defense Policy Dialogue, held for the first time in Vietnam on August 17, 2010 by the Acting United States Deputy under Secretary of Defense Robert Scher and Vietnamese Deputy Defense Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh, has become an annual event between the two countries’ defense establishments. The Defense Policy Dialogue is now considered as the primary mechanism to review and guide defense relations between the United States and Vietnam. Like other mechanisms, the Vietnam–U.S. Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue and the Vietnam–U.S. Defense Policy Dialogue help to further promote mutual trust as the foundation for the growing military-to-military relationship between the United States and Vietnam, and to reflect both sides’ commitment to intensifying their bilateral ties on the basis of friendship and shared understanding to ensure peace and prosperity in the Asia–Pacific region.⁴⁸

As Vietnam and the United States continue these high-level strategic dialogues, the level of comfort and understanding among participants grows, which helps facilitate security and defense cooperation. Yet, the fact that Hanoi and Washington agree on gradual and measured ways to apply to defense and security challenges suggests that a level of sensitivity still exists in this area. General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong said at a 2013 diplomatic conference in Hanoi that: “We should also be persistent in our principle which is neither join any military alliance nor give permission to any foreign country to have military bases in Viet Nam. Viet Nam does not ally with any country to oppose others.”⁴⁹ Indeed, Hanoi’s insistence on the three–no principle has established the “ceiling” for the bilateral mil-to-mil cooperation.

Search and Rescue, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief

Search and rescue exercises represent another promising aspect of security and defense cooperation between the two nations. In April 2014, guided-missile destroyer *USS John S. McCain* (DDG 56) conducted a search and rescue exercise with a Vietnam People's Navy minesweeper off the coast of Da Nang. This first search and rescue activity between the U.S. and Vietnamese navies took place several hours after the *USS John S. McCain* got underway from Da Nang port, concluding a very productive series of professional exchanges and skills transfers as part of Naval Engagement Activity (NEA) Vietnam. According to Captain Paul Schlise, this search and rescue event "was an important stepping stone in building confidence to operate together in the maritime domain."⁵⁰ In a similar vein, Commander Chase Sargeant said: "Both ships did a fine job executing this search and rescue training—communications were professional and the crews handled their ships well—setting the tone for follow-on events between our navies."⁵¹

Also, there were workshops on emergency management and emergency response for the Oregon National and Vietnam's National Committee for Search and Rescue (VINASARCOM) as part of the State Partnership Program. For example, in 2014 the Oregon National Guard hosted a delegation from VINASARCOM led by Vice Admiral Pham Ngoc Minh.⁵² The Oregon National Guard and VINASARCOM began their partnership in 2012 as part of the National Guard Bureau's State Partnership Program, which pairs states with nations across the globe to support security cooperation between the United States and other countries. The relationship between Oregon as a state partner and VINASARCOM as the leading military agency for emergency management in Vietnam illustrates that building and maintaining capabilities as emergency managers in times of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief benefit both countries and contribute to promoting stability and security in the region.⁵³

In August 2017, members of the Oregon National Guard's Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear Defense (CBRNE) Enhanced Response Force Package took part in the 2017 Disaster Management Engagement Activity held in Hanoi, Vietnam. The main goal of this joint training was to enable the troops from Vietnam and the United States to develop professional relations and to work together as one team during the event of a disaster. According to Marine Corps Chief Warrant Officer 4 Christopher Joy, a CBRNE defense officer with the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force, this combined training and interaction with Vietnamese partners was "absolutely amazing." Despite the language barriers, both sides "speak CBRNE and that is what is bringing us together and strengthening our partnership."⁵⁴

Vietnam and the United States also engaged in multilateral cooperation projects on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and joint humanitarian training exercises through the Pacific Partnership and Pacific Angel engagements.⁵⁵ As one of the most natural disaster-prone nations in the Southeast Asian region, Vietnam needs to enhance its disaster preparedness and response and recovery capabilities. Cooperation with the United States in this field, therefore, is of great importance. In this connection, a

workshop on Collaborative Disaster Preparedness was organized in August 2015 in Vietnam to bring members of various Vietnamese agencies together with U.S. officials and regional as well as international experts for discussions on disaster preparedness and response. These interactions facilitated network building among members of the U.S. and Vietnamese armed forces, government civilian agencies, non-governmental organizations, and intergovernmental organizations. Such kind of workshop is poised to enhancing Vietnamese officials' knowledge of national and international actors' role and responsibilities to better coordinate combined disaster responses in the future.

Peacekeeping Operations

Cooperation and coordination on peacekeeping operations between the United States and Vietnam have increased with a focus on enhancing Vietnamese ability to take part in peacekeeping missions for the United Nations. In 2014, Vietnam set up the Vietnam Peacekeeping Center and sent two army officers to South Sudan for a UN peacekeeping task. By 2017, up to 20 Vietnamese officers worked at the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic and the UN Mission in South Sudan.⁵⁶ Vietnam was recognized as an official member of the Association of Asia Pacific Peace Operations Training Centers.

Through the Global Peace Operations Initiative, the United States is a major supporter of Vietnam's efforts to build its PKO capabilities. Vietnam has worked closely with both the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Department of Defense toward that goal. In 2015, a five-day UN Force Generation Workshop was held in Hanoi. At this workshop, officers from the U.S. Pacific Command and the Vietnamese military, and peacekeeping representatives from the United Nations discussed the technical details of implementing modern peacekeeping operations, namely the decision-making processes involved in assembling and administering international peacekeeping forces; training troops for peace operations; and the logistics required to successfully assist peacekeeping forces in the field.⁵⁷

Deputy Defense Minister, Senior Lieutenant General Nguyen Chi Vinh emphasized that the conference illustrated Vietnam's resolute determination and sense of responsibility to engage in UN peacekeeping activities. He made it clear that Vietnam has recognized that "participation in peacekeeping activities is a difficult task. We need experience, technical, and other support for our soldiers to get involved in overseas missions. The UN's support and experience from other countries for Vietnam is of great importance."⁵⁸ U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam Ted Osius saw this workshop as another important and positive step to fully take part in UN peacekeeping operations. Also, in 2015 the United States and Vietnam signed the U.S.–Vietnam Peacekeeping MOU, which consolidated cooperation in training, technical assistance, equipment and infrastructure support, laying the foundation for their cooperation on future peacekeeping missions.⁵⁹ In addition, the United States helped Vietnam construct a training facility at the Vietnam Peacekeeping Center, and supported Vietnam's objective to provide a Level 2 Field Hospital and an Engineer unit for a future UN mission. Through the

Global Peace Operations Initiative and other U.S. defense and security engagements, the United States has built a concrete plan to support Vietnam's contribution to global peace and security for years to come.⁶⁰ Indeed, Vietnam's enthusiasm for engaging with UN peacekeeping activities has been met with substantial experience and resources to help Vietnam involve itself effectively in UN peacekeeping operations of the United States.

In short, between 2011 and 2017, the United States and Vietnam intensified practical cooperation on maritime security, high-level dialogues, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and peacekeeping operations with participation at all levels of government. To indicate the commitments on this area of cooperation, Hanoi and Washington plan to upgrade the annual high-ranking dialogues to the ministerial level for more effective coordination and cooperation. Closer military-to-military cooperation during the period of 2011 and 2017 between the United States and Vietnam has eventually transformed U.S.–Vietnam security relationship, which was considered a “sensitive area,” from the exploratory stage to a new and expanding one, thus vividly showing that “national interests were bigger than history and ideology.”⁶¹

Potential and Limits

As the two countries have a common vision for the future of a peaceful and prosperous Asia–Pacific region,⁶² and seek to deepen military cooperation, there is potential for the U.S.–Vietnam security cooperation to become more balanced and effective. Yet, it is also clear that U.S.–Vietnam security cooperation has certain limits.

Potential

With recent developments in their security cooperation, the United States and Vietnam are enabled to engage in a wide spectrum of cooperative activities. In other words, between the ceiling and the floor there is potential that has not been fully explored. Enhanced education and training for the senior military staff of Vietnam's Department of Defense and further establishing operational contacts between the U.S. and Vietnamese military forces are promising areas. Education and training might contribute to a higher level of military capacity development in Vietnam's armed forces to cope with both traditional and non-traditional challenges. At the bottom line, human resources play an important role in effective strategic cooperation in the future.

Also, Washington and Hanoi can make the best use of IMET for military training opportunities for Vietnamese military staff. IMET resources for ongoing domains, including military medicine, military science and technology, and humanitarian assistance can be utilized for such new domains as military training on airport safety and maintenance of armored personnel carriers. Washington and Hanoi can also work together in refueling stops and particularly passing exercise activities (PASSEX) which can directly support the execution of maritime engagements such as the Naval Engagement Activity (NEA) with Vietnam.⁶³ Additionally, with the lift of the ban on

lethal arms sales to Vietnam, the United States and Vietnam can now consider the foreign military sales (FMS) process as a tool to substantively deepen the U.S.–Vietnam security cooperation. This can begin with Vietnam’s purchase of spare parts, and the repairs and restoration for UH-1 transport helicopters. These sales would pave the way for greater progress in an enhanced FMS tie on the basis of building up emergent capability and equipment gaps in, for instance, the maritime area or in command and control, communications, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems.

Mutual trust is a particularly crucial factor in the domain of security cooperation. Maintaining such confidence–building mechanisms as the Defense Policy Dialogue and Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue create opportunities for the United States and Vietnam to share viewpoints, work on differences, and promote common strategic interests. In addition, through actual coordination and interaction in maritime security, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and peacekeeping, Washington and Hanoi will gain more understanding of military and political perspectives and become more familiar with each other’s defense establishments, thus paving the way for bolder cooperative projects including joint drills and weapons purchase for Vietnam’s armed forces modernization.

Limits

Certain hurdles to the expansion of U.S.–Vietnam security cooperation remain. The first limiting factor is Vietnam War memories. Despite the fact that the two sides want to look forward to the future, the Vietnam War is still “fought the second time in memory.”⁶⁴ The America syndrome, just like the Vietnam syndrome, is still felt in Vietnam, according to Le Van Bang, the first Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States following the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1995. The war legacies then serve as a reminder of the war hardship. Millions of U.S. and Vietnamese people have suffered, directly and indirectly, by the wartime U.S. spraying of Agent Orange over southern and central Vietnam.⁶⁵ It is estimated that three million Vietnamese citizens have been affected by chemical Agent Orange, including at least 150,000 children born with serious birth defects.⁶⁶ The memories of the Vietnam War, therefore, may slow down the pace, scale and scope of U.S.–Vietnam bilateral cooperation in the security domain. In this context, the America syndrome also suggests a level of suspicion in Hanoi about the United States’ real intentions as the United States continued its criticism of Vietnam’s human rights abuses and lack of democracy and religious freedom. When Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet visited the United States, President George W. Bush welcomed a warmer relationship with Vietnam, but he also warned that Vietnam must improve its human rights record and called on Vietnam to “have a strong commitment to human rights, freedom and democracy.”⁶⁷ In the same vein, during his 2016 visit to Vietnam, President Barack Obama had a meeting with Vietnamese civil society leaders, and after the meeting he pointed out that:

“It’s my hope the government of Vietnam comes to recognize what we’ve recognized and what so many countries around the world have recognized, and that is that it’s very hard to prosper in this modern economy if you haven’t fully unleashed the potential of your people. And your people’s potential, in part, derives from their ability to express themselves and express new ideas, to try to right wrongs that are taking place in the society. And so it’s my hope that, increasingly, the Vietnamese government, seeing the enormous strides that the country is making, has more confidence that its people want to work together but also want to be able to assemble and participate in the society in ways that will be good for everybody in the long run.”⁶⁸

The concern about the U.S. supporting regime change has been much reduced.⁶⁹ Yet, Hanoi still warns of peaceful evolution.⁷⁰ In other words, Hanoi’s vigilance can be a constraining factor that could hinder both sides to further practical cooperation in the security area.

The second limiting factor relates to China. China pushes the United States and Vietnam closer; however, it also pulls these two nations far away from each other. Vietnam is concerned about Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, and the United States is concerned about interference in freedom of navigation and over-flight in the South China Sea. Due to China’s unilateral actions and claims in the South China Sea, there is a convergence in strategic interests of Vietnam and the United States. Yet for both the United States and Vietnam, China remains their important partner.⁷¹ When both the United States and Vietnam desire to avoid confrontations with China, it implies that Washington and Hanoi will not elevate their bilateral security relations to a point that can destabilize their relations with China. In other words, as both the United States and Vietnam feel the need to embrace China, there is a certain restriction for improved military and defense relationship between the United States and Vietnam

Furthermore, as Vietnam adopts a balanced approach to its relations with big powers, Hanoi wants to develop good relations with both Washington and Beijing. It at the same time does not want to get tangled in the U.S.–China rivalry. Security and overall cooperation with the United States, therefore, has to be kept at a pace that would not anger China. Vietnam’s consistent foreign policy of independence, self-reliance, peace and development, diversification of relations, and proactive international integration is deliberately aimed at avoiding taking sides or become too dependent on any singular power. Vietnamese military leaders usually emphasize that Vietnam’s effort to develop security relations with the United States is part of Vietnam’s approach to cultivating security relations with various nations, including China, India, South Korea, and Russia. Vietnam underlines that its policies toward the United States and China are independent of each other. Evidently, Vietnam wants to pursue independent relations with all nations on the “three No” principle, thus it will not (i) enter into any military alliances, (ii) take sides with any nation against another, or (iii) give permission to any nation to have military bases in Vietnam. In reality, Vietnam applies the logic of the three–no principle

to both the United States and China.

U.S.–China relations and Vietnam–China relations are not zero-sum games, a complicated combination of geography, political ideology, domestic politics, historical experiences and shifting distributions of material power will cause these nations to make constant adjustments to their bilateral relations. The trick for Vietnamese leaders is how to maintain a good relationship with China while adding strategic value to its cooperation with the United States. At the same time, the trick for U.S. leaders is how to maintain a strong politico–economic, diplomatic and military engagement with East Asian countries, including with Vietnam, without provoking defensive reactions from China. When both the United States and Vietnam desire to avoid confrontations with China, it implies that Washington and Hanoi will not elevate their bilateral security relations to a point that can destabilize their relations with China.

The third limiting factor relates to uncertainties with regard to U.S. regional commitment. With its rebalance to the Asia–Pacific, the Obama administration sought to expand U.S. presence in the region and see Vietnam as an important player in the region. Therefore, there had been positive movements to take U.S.–Vietnam relations “to the next level.”⁷² The Obama administration viewed this relationship not only as significant on its own nature, but as part of a strategy to increase U.S. engagement in the Asia–Pacific region and especially Southeast Asia. Under the Trump administration, there have been signs that the United States continues to recognize Vietnam’s more critical role in the region. In the National Security Strategy released in December 2017, the Trump administration confirmed its willingness to “re-energize” the partnership with Vietnam and to help Vietnam become a cooperative maritime partner.⁷³

In addition, the United States under Trump has demonstrated that forging stronger relations with ASEAN is important to the United States. With a huge market of USD 2.6 trillion and a population of over 622 million, ASEAN continues to be a vital partner to the United States.⁷⁴ The Obama administration’s Secretary of State John Kerry once said, “ASEAN really is front and center in the region’s multicultural architecture, and we want it to remain there.”⁷⁵ In the same vein, the Trump administration’s Secretary of State Rex Tillerson reaffirmed that, “ASEAN is an essential partner.”⁷⁶ These statements have underlined the U.S. recognition of the partnership with Vietnam and commitments to ASEAN. Despite the high-sounding rhetoric from Washington, Hanoi has reasons to be concerned as to whether the United States will commit to keeping its promises. First, there have been divisions in the U.S. government on its strategic adjustment toward Vietnam. While many in the U.S. government support U.S.–Vietnam relations, some believe that fast developments with Vietnam can be detrimental to U.S. interests. For instance, speaking in a hearing on President Obama’s visit to Vietnam in June 2016, Christopher Henry Smith, the U.S. Representative for New Jersey and a member of the Republican Party said: “His visit was an epic failure of diplomacy... This is shortsighted, misguided, and driven by an ideological agenda more than a clear assessment of long-term U.S. interests.”⁷⁷ Second, U.S. attitude and policy toward its allies have been inconsistent. Allies’ confidence has been shaken by President Trump’s “American first” foreign policy. That the Trump administration decided to withdraw from the Trans–

Pacific Partnership, a signature initiative of the Obama administration's rebalance to Asia made the United States' Asian allies skeptical of Washington's commitment to the Asia-Pacific. Moreover, the Trump administration has *reduced* U.S. commitment in multilateral institutions. President Trump has raised questions about the value of investing in multilateral institutions, and has suggested a fair U.S. share of international spending at the United Nations, the World Bank and for many other multilateral fora. The 2017 National Security Strategy placed an emphasis on the significance of achieving better outcomes in multilateral institutions. As the United States is retreating from multilateral institutions and raising burden-sharing concerns with its allies, Washington may commit less resources and expenditure to Asia. That could mean less support for U.S. security cooperation with Vietnam. Therefore, it is uncertain whether the United States will commit to keeping its commitments. It is the skepticism about Washington's real intentions and commitments that may prevent the United States and Vietnam from getting closer to each other.

Conclusion

The security relationship between the United States and Vietnam has developed to become an essential building block of the U.S.–Vietnam comprehensive partnership. That Vietnam and the United States can quickly move from enmity to cooperation is a striking illustration of the changes and realignment which the end of the Cold War has made possible and desirable.

Due to the convergence of interests and concerns, a growing security relationship benefits both Vietnam and the United States. Vietnam's importance to U.S. interests grows in the long run because Vietnam, an emerging nation, increasingly takes responsibilities commensurate with its position as a stakeholder and a contributor in the international system. The United States' strategic future lies in the Asia-Pacific due to that region's vital web of military capabilities, world trade and natural resources. Though there are certain restrictions on the security relationship between the United States and Vietnam, namely memories of the Vietnam War, the China factor and uncertainties about U.S. commitments, it is undeniable that these nations are poised to be each other's strategic partner. Vietnam and the United States can be promising partners in the security sphere. Yet, there is still more work to be done. As Hanoi and Washington move forward in further defining the security relationship, they can work on substantive multilateral and bilateral military exercises, military training events, and even arms sales to increase Vietnamese military capacity. This eventually helps to establish a sturdier basis for a more balanced and effective security relationship. Generally speaking, the new developments in the U.S.–Vietnam security relationship during the 2011–2017 period offers major potential benefits to both sides. The question now is whether Vietnam and the United States will be able to adjust to new roles and handle new challenges to preserve and extend their security cooperation which has helped promote mutual understanding and benefits for more than two decades.

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Notes on Contributors

Dang Cam Tu is a senior researcher at the Institute for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies of the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, focusing on major powers' strategies and their relations with Vietnam.

Hang Thi Thuy Nguyen is a lecturer at the Faculty of International Politics and Diplomacy of the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam in Hanoi, Vietnam. She is currently a Fulbright Visiting Scholar with Cornell University's Southeast Asia Program.

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