

Vietnam treads fine line on China-US ties

- **Hanoi is careful not to upset ties with China, its biggest trading partner, and Washington, its strategic bulwark against Beijing's growing military strength**

SCMP Editorial

Of all the Southeast Asian nations balancing relations between Beijing and Washington, arguably none has as fine a line to navigate as Vietnam. The country's strategic importance to both puts it at the centre of their rivalry, necessitating an independent position and promoting good relations. That was apparent in recent talks between State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Vietnamese counterpart, Bui Thanh Son, on the sidelines of a Mekong River cooperation meeting in Myanmar. Their discussions were cordial, with an emphasis on the need to work together for stability, development and prosperity.

Disputes over trade and territory in the South China Sea rich in fish, oil and gas have long marred relations. Wang, in observing the socialist values shared by their communist governments and common strategic interests, highlighted the gains to be made from China's "high-value opening up" and stressed the need to maintain communications. Son said Beijing was Hanoi's top diplomatic priority, but he also called for favourable conditions for Vietnamese exports and a resumption of commercial flights affected by the pandemic. With China being Vietnam's biggest trading partner and a major supplier of materials, it has been careful not to upset ties.

Such is also the case between Hanoi and Washington. Vietnam has been accused by the United States of many of the same claimed violations of rights and freedoms as China and is involved in trade and currency disputes. Hanoi, like Beijing, has refused to condemn Moscow for its invasion of Ukraine. But it has largely avoided American tariffs, sanctions and other punishments.

Hanoi looks to Washington as a strategic bulwark against Beijing's growing military strength, while US President Joe Biden's administration is eager for Vietnam to join its push to create a Nato-like security grouping in Asia to project power against China. While Vietnam was named by the US as being among partners of its Indo-Pacific Strategy and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, China and Russia are of higher diplomatic importance for Hanoi.

It is being careful not to advance relations with one power at the expense of another.