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ABN # 65 648 097 123



## **Background Briefing:**

### **The U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership: What's in a Name?**

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**July 26, 2013**

The U.S.-Vietnam Joint Statement issued after discussions in The White House between presidents Barack Obama and Truong Tan Sang declared they “decided to form a U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership to provide an overarching framework for advancing the relationship.” Up until this announcement it was widely assumed that Vietnam and the United States would raise their bilateral relations to a strategic partnership, first suggested by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during a visit to Hanoi in 2010.

Vietnam has long sought to diversify and multilateralize its foreign relations. In the process of expanding its foreign relations Vietnam has had to treat some states as more equal than others. Vietnam has applied the term “strategic partner” to single out these special states. Currently Vietnam has formed strategic partnerships with twelve countries: the Russian Federation (2001), Japan (2006), India (2007), People’s Republic of China (2008), Republic of Korea (2009), Spain (2009), United Kingdom (2010), Germany (2011), and Italy, Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia (all in 2013). Vietnam’s partnerships with Russia and China were later raised to comprehensive strategic partner and strategic cooperative partner, respectively.

Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung noted in his keynote speech to this year’s Shangri-La Dialogue that Vietnam sought strategic partnerships with all permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. Since Vietnam already had strategic partnerships with China, Russia and the United Kingdom, this meant priority was attached to establishing strategic partnerships with France and the United States.

What is the difference between a strategic partnership and a comprehensive partnership?

The term strategic partner is a political term that identifies states Vietnam has developed comprehensive bilateral relations with and which Vietnam considers to be particularly important for the attainment of its national interests. Vietnam’s strategic partnerships are embodied in formal declarations whose form and content varies from partner to partner. Generally strategic partnership agreements set out a high-level joint mechanism to oversee their implementation. Strategic partnership agreements usually are also accompanied by a multi-year Plan of Action covering objectives in each sector of the agreement such as political-diplomatic, economic, science and technology, social-cultural and security and defence, etc.

There are two likely explanations why the U.S. and Vietnam opted for a comprehensive partnership rather than a strategic partnership. First, negotiations on a strategic partnership bogged down and the two sides may have concluded that a less formal agreement was preferable to no agreement at all. Second, Vietnamese sources report that senior party conservatives objected to using the term strategic partnership to characterize their relations with the United States. For example, after the Joint Statement was issued Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs directed the media to not to refer to the comprehensive partnership as an upgrading of Vietnam's relations with the United States. Vietnamese media were instructed to report that the comprehensive partnership was only "declared."

Should the U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership be viewed as a strategic partnership by another name? The precedent is Vietnam's comprehensive partnership with Australia. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, in his first spell in office, objected to including the term strategic because bilateral relations with Vietnam had not yet reached the level of intimacy and cooperation enjoyed by Australia with its allies and other likeminded states. Australia and Vietnam opted to designate their bilateral relations a comprehensive partnership. The agreement was accompanied by a Plan of Action and a joint mechanism to oversee its implementation.

The U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership is a work in progress. Most of the items included in its nine points merely reiterated areas of cooperation that were already underway. The Joint Statement reinforced the role of existing bilateral mechanisms in several areas (Trade and Investment Framework Agreement Council; Joint Committee for Scientific and Technological Cooperation; Defense Policy Dialogue; and Political, Security, and Defense dialogue). However, the Comprehensive Partnership did create a new political and diplomatic dialogue mechanism at ministerial level.

The Comprehensive Partnership makes no mention of a Plan of Action. Nor does it mention a high-level mechanism to coordinate the nine sectors enumerated in the Joint Statement. Instead, the Joint Statement notes that new mechanisms for cooperation will be created for each of the following sectors: political and diplomatic relations, trade and economic ties, science and technology, education and training, environment and health, war legacy issues, defence and security, protection and promotion of human rights, and culture, sports and tourism.

In summary, the presidential discussions mainly advanced bilateral cooperation on trade and economic issues, including conclusion of an agreement on the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and flagged regular dialogue between the U.S. Secretary of State and Vietnam's Minister for Foreign Affairs. But cooperation in other areas will largely continue on their present trajectories. The U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership is mainly an agreement describing incremental progress across a number of sectors. It falls short of Vietnam's other formal strategic partnership agreements and currently lacks the strategic vision of Vietnam's comprehensive partnership agreement with Australia.

Suggested citation: Carlyle A. Thayer, "The U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership: What's in a Name?," *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, July 26, 2013. All background briefs are posted on Scribd.com (search for Thayer). To remove yourself from the mailing list type UNSUBSCRIBE in the Subject heading and hit the Reply key.

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