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Washington's Challenge in Southeast Asia: The View From Vietnam

The challenge for Washington is that countries like Vietnam are reluctant to sacrifice their relations with either China or the United States.

By Ngo Minh Tri

Two years ago, when I was speaking to an American international affairs expert in Ho Chi Minh City, I remarked on the “unchangeable fact” that underpins Vietnam’s fraught relationship with China: “China is a powerful neighbor,” I told the expert, “and Vietnam has faced China for thousands of years and is still finding ways to coexist with China.”

Last month, while U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris was visiting Vietnam, China announced the suspension of trade through the Lung Vai border gate in northern Vietnam, stranding hundreds of trucks which were bringing Vietnamese agricultural produce to China for several days. Vietnam’s agricultural industry suffered as a result. Over the years, Vietnamese goods destined for Chinese markets have repeatedly experienced such treatment. For example, in July and August, China also imposed import bans on Vietnamese fruit and agricultural produce, while it was still allowing agricultural produce to be transported from Yunnan into northern Vietnam.

The two incidents may not be directly related, but the image of the trucks backed up at the Chinese border reflects the fact that Hanoi faces many risks in confronting Beijing directly. In recent years, like many countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Vietnam has also become economically intertwined with China.

At the same time, China’s rise is causing many concerns to the ASEAN region and the wider international community, leading to an intensification of U.S.-China competition. The timed withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan frees up more resources with which the U.S. can compete with China. Washington is also seeking to deepen its cooperation with other partners in the Indo-Pacific, including ASEAN members, as part of that competition.

Southeast Asia nations are increasingly being placed in situations where they are forced to choose between the U.S. and China. This is alarming for these nations’ governments, given their dual dependence on the U.S. for security and China for trade and investment.

As U.S.-China competition deepens, the Chinese party-state has unleashed its aggressive form of “wolf warrior” diplomacy and stepped up its pressure on other countries. Last year, to punish Canberra for its call for an independent international investigation into the origins of COVID-19, Beijing imposed tariffs on a range of Australian goods including wine and beef. Meanwhile, the U.S. and Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam have some overlapping interests, including security concerns in the South China Sea.

Over the past five years, the U.S. has strengthened its gunboat diplomacy in the South China Sea to confront China’s growing maritime power. Washington has conducted many freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), in addition to bilateral and multilateral military drills and

exercises with allies and partners. These include the three other members of the Quad – India, Japan, and Australia – as well as nations in Europe and Southeast Asia.

In addition, the U.S. and allies such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany have submitted Notes Verbales to the United Nations challenging the legality of China's expansive maritime claims in the South China Sea. The U.S. government has also sanctioned some Chinese companies involved in the construction of infrastructure and military outposts in disputed parts of the South China Sea.

However, the U.S. efforts have largely been ineffective at reducing tensions in the South China Sea. Since it was issued in 2016, Beijing has rejected the ruling of Arbitral Tribunal in the Hague on the South China Sea case. China has also built airstrips, piers, and radar emplacements on reefs and islands in its possession, to which it has deployed various types of warplanes and naval vessels. Beijing now almost completely dominates the South China Sea through military power. In addition, China has also passed a new maritime law as a way to legitimize its control of the vital waterway through its coast guard and used its maritime militia to advance and defend its claims there. The result has been greater and more sustained tensions in the South China Sea.

China's growing military power is a threat not only to ASEAN but also to the U.S. bases in the Pacific. In August 2020, China launched two medium-range ballistic missiles (so-called "carrier killer" missiles) into the South China Sea. It was a message to the U.S. that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) could attack U.S. aircraft carriers and battle ships in the area. China has also deployed H-6 bombers to its island fortresses in the Spratly islands, from which its cruise missiles can attack the U.S. military presence on Guam.

China's initiatives show the inability of the U.S. to convince allies and partners in Asia that Washington can contribute to restraining Beijing's activities. Therefore, the U.S. needs to develop an effective strategy to ensure security for the South China Sea. But the U.S. strategy towards the region also needs to go beyond that.

ASEAN members like Vietnam also desire closer economic cooperation with the United States. Many are concerned that if the U.S. focuses too closely on security cooperation, it will send a threatening message to China that will increase tensions in the region. For this reason, as well as simple proximity, Vietnam will always be careful in strengthening its relationship with the U.S.

Under President Donald Trump, the U.S. championed the Blue Dot Network, which brings together the public, private, and civil society sectors to build and finance quality infrastructure projects. The U.S. also has a plan to reshape global supply chains, reducing their reliance on China. These initiatives can contribute to reducing the vulnerability of allies and partners to Chinese economic coercion. They can also help Vietnam and other ASEAN members reduce the risks of standing up to China.

If the U.S. wants stronger support and closer partnership with Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries, it must change the approach, rebalancing its focus away from security to focus on the economic cooperation that is central to the future prosperity of Vietnam and other ASEAN members. Geographic proximity and economic interdependence mean that Southeast Asian nations are reluctant to treat China as a hostile adversary.

Any effective U.S. strategy needs to acknowledge this fact, while addressing the concrete economic needs of the region, especially its recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the Delta variant of COVID-19 has taken the wind out of the sails of ASEAN's economic recovery. This presents an ideal opportunity for the U.S. to advance its economic game in the region and consolidate partnerships with Southeast Asian states, while keeping up the pressure on China over its disruptive activities in the South China Sea.

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