

# U.S.-Vietnam Security Cooperation: Catalysts and Constraints

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In any bilateral relationship, trust is measured by the depth and scope of defense ties, not by trade volume and investment flows. U.S.-Vietnam defense cooperation over the past 20 years has not been an exception. Despite falling behind in their economic and political relations, security cooperation between the two has been progressing slowly but firmly, serving as a foundation for overall relations to move forward. This article analyzes the various catalysts and constraints on forging U.S.-Vietnamese strategic trust. It argues that the degree of bilateral security cooperation has been shaped by a number of structural and agential factors: changes in the Asian balance of power stemming from China's rise and the U.S. pivot to Asia, convergences and divergences in national interests and threat perceptions with regard to China policy and the South China Sea disputes, and the accumulation of historical lessons. These have had a "push and pull" effect on strategic cooperation.

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**Key words:** ASEAN, China, security, South China Sea, U.S.-Vietnam defense cooperation

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In 2015, Vietnam and the United States celebrated the 20th anniversary of the normalization of their bilateral diplomatic relations. This was considered an important milestone in Vietnam-U.S. relations, and a series of meetings and conferences were held in Hanoi and Washington in which participants reviewed the past 20 years of cooperation, analyzed both strengths and weaknesses of their relationship, and made recommendations on what could be done better to promote this bilateral relationship between former wartime adversaries during past Indochinese conflicts. All of these developments were symbolic of the considerable momentum that has developed in this bilateral

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association since the two countries' diplomatic relations were normalized in 1995. They also point to a growing dimension of geopolitical cooperation which is bound to impact on the strategic environment in the South China Sea and throughout Southeast Asia.

With such a painful recent history, the dramatic transformation of the U.S.-Vietnam relationship from wartime enmity to comprehensive partnership within such a short time span merits academic attention. Existing literature tends to explain the rapid progress of U.S.-Vietnam strategic ties through a realist lens of balance of power, that is to counter China's rise and its increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea, and attributes the limits of this bilateral relationship to Vietnam's concerns about regime legitimacy (see, e.g., Liu & Sun, 2015). This article does not reject such logic; yet it posits that viewing this relationship from a single factor perspective, be it balance of power or regime legitimacy, often provides an oversimplified explanation of U.S.-Vietnam security ties. Instead, we posit that the dynamics of U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation are shaped by a number of catalysts and constraints stemming from the interplay of both structural and agential causes.

Reviewing the evolution of U.S.-Vietnam relations from before the Vietnam war to the present, this article finds that structural causes embedded in the bipolar Cold War order were the most salient, if not the single, determining factor that shaped U.S.-Vietnam strategic rivalry in the Cold War. Bilateral security cooperation in the post-Cold War era, particularly since the normalization of ties in 1995, meanwhile, has been forged by the diversification of intervening factors including a historical heritage (the war legacy and historical learning), structural changes in the balance of power in Asia (the rise of China and U.S. pivot to Asia), and the convergence-cum-divergence between Vietnam's and the United States' threat perceptions and national interests regarding the South China Sea disputes and their corresponding policies toward China. The emergence of agential factors, such as Vietnam's perception of security threats and national interests as well as learning from its past mistakes in designing its strategies toward great powers, also contributes to the shaping of the defense cooperation. This explains why Vietnam is moving closer to the United States strategically, but thus far has not acted in the same realist way that it did during the Cold War—to ally with the United States to counter against the China threat in the South China Sea.

### **From Foes to Friends: Historical and Political Background**

It is widely known that the United States and Vietnam fought one of the longest and bloodiest wars in the Cold War. However, few know about the "mis-perceptions" or "missed opportunities" that prevented the two countries from establishing a relationship that might have helped avoid that miserable war. During the mid-1940s, the United States, through its Office of Strategic Services, and the Hochiminh-led *Viet Minh* League worked hand-in-hand in the fight against Japanese imperialism which eventually contributed to the *Viet Minh*'s take-over of the government in Hanoi in August 1945. In his Declaration of Independence on September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh recalled Thomas Jefferson's famous saying enshrined in the 1776 American Declaration of Independence:

“that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” During the 1945–1946 period, Ho also wrote a number of letters to U.S. President Harry Truman and U.S. Secretary of State James Byrnes expressing his high hopes that the United States would aid Vietnam in its struggle for national independence amid French colonialism. It had been argued that if Washington had supported the anti colonial movement in Indochina rather than caving into the French demands, the United States might have been spared a long and lethal war in Vietnam (Bartholomew-Feis, 2006).

Yet, the Cold War dynamics changed the course of history. Driven by their concerns about the “domino theory” and a mis-perception that Ho Chi Minh was a radical communist or a “Soviet puppet” seeking to “communize” the entire Indochinese region, the Truman administration decided to support France and Britain in suppressing the independence movements in Indochina, which subsequently led to “America’s longest war.” As a counter balance, Hanoi decided to ally with the Soviet Union and China to mobilize forces for its struggle for national independence and unification which was eventually realized in April 1975.

Nonetheless, the Vietnam war was by no means a dead end for U.S.-Vietnam relations. After three decades of continuous conflicts, a war-ravaged Vietnam realized the urgent need to rebuild the country. One important pathway toward that end was to seek rapprochement with its Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) neighbors and the West, including the United States. As early as May 1976, Hanoi and Washington started negotiations on the normalization of relations. Differences remained, however, over issues such as the identification and repatriation of American Prisoners of War (POW) and those Missing in Action (MIA) as well as Vietnam’s demand for war compensation. When Jimmy Carter assumed the U.S. presidency in January 1977, his administration was particularly enthusiastic in such negotiations with Hanoi and even “turned on the green light” for Vietnam’s entry into the United Nations in September 1977.

However, structural causes, particularly the Sino-Soviet split and the Sino-West rapprochement, once again cast a long shadow on U.S.-Vietnam relations. Amid the heightened Sino-Soviet split and the deterioration of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, Hanoi’s decision to enter a formal alliance with the Soviet Union in 1978 created a new crisis in its relations with China, the United States, and Vietnam’s ASEAN neighbors. In this context, Vietnam proposed a Zone of Genuine Independence, Peace, and Neutrality which rivalled the earlier Zone of Freedom, Peace, and Neutrality adopted by ASEAN in 1971. Hanoi’s point was that Southeast Asian countries should be truly independent from great powers (e.g., China and the United States), but the initiative was dismissed because Vietnam itself was seen as a “Soviet satellite” (Mastny & Zhu, 2013). China’s subsequent invasion of Vietnam in 1979 and Vietnam’s intervention in Cambodia in the same year suspended Vietnam-U.S. relations and Vietnam’s foreign relations overall for more than a decade. The United States joined hands with China and ASEAN members in imposing embargoes and in isolating Vietnam in the international arena until the end of the Cambodian conflict in 1991.

The end of the bipolar era opened a new page in U.S.-Vietnam relations. Emerging from the Cold War deeply frustrated with alliance politics and keen to preserve its hard-won independence, Hanoi decided to pursue an “omnidirectional” and self-reliant foreign policy. To support its economic reform (*Doi Moi*) which was initiated in 1986, Hanoi also adopted “new thinking” in its foreign relations—to “befriend all nations in the world community” including the improvement of ties with its former foes (China, the United States, and ASEAN). Against this background, on April 9, 1991, Washington introduced a “roadmap” for improving relations with Vietnam. Resolving the war legacy remained one of the biggest barriers toward this end. For Washington, the lingering “Vietnam syndrome” among war veterans created pressure for the government to push Vietnam hard on the POW/MIA issue. For Hanoi, the hardest issue was to “cool the heads” of some of the Vietnamese elite who still perceived the United States as a “strategic opponent” who wanted to undermine the Vietnamese communist leadership through subversive activities.

Vietnam’s complete withdrawal of its troops from Cambodia and its proactive cooperation in the POW/MIA issue further facilitated rapprochement. With distinguished Vietnam War veterans, for example, Senators John McCain and John Kerry, as well as leading American businesses realizing that Vietnam was a promising market, on March 2, 1994, President Bill Clinton lifted the economic embargo on Vietnam, paving the way for normalization of bilateral relations in July 1995. Five years later, Clinton became the first American President to make a state visit to Vietnam since before the Vietnam War, and his successor, George W. Bush, made the second visit to Vietnam by an American President when Hanoi hosted the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in 2006. In return, Vietnamese Presidents Nguyen Minh Triet and Truong Tan Sang visited the United States in 2007 and 2013, respectively. During President Sang’s 2013 visit, the two countries launched their comprehensive partnership framework.

Perhaps, the most notable recent event was the first visit to the United States by the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Mr. Nguyen Phu Trong, at the invitation of U.S. President Barack Obama, on July 7–11, 2015. America had never before welcomed the general secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party (who has no official state title) with the highest protocol for a head of state. This visit underscored the United States’ respect not only for Vietnam’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the principle of noninterference in Vietnam’s internal affairs, but also its political institutions. To put it in another way, the United States is increasingly sensitized that the political choice for Vietnam’s future destiny is in the hands of the Vietnamese people. This is a firm indication of how Vietnam-U.S. relations have matured over the years.

In light of this development, the following section analyzes the importance of security cooperation in forging overall U.S.-Vietnam relations since their normalization, as well as the catalysts and constraints on such maneuvers. It identifies the structural and agential factors that have shaped those catalysts and constraints. If U.S.-Vietnam rivalry during the Cold War was overwhelmingly determined by the bipolar structure, the evolving multipolar order in Asia allowed the two countries to have a greater agency role in making strategic

choices and designing policies toward each other. Indeed, during a visit to Vietnam in December 2013, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry remarked on U.S.-Vietnamese relations: "I can't think of two countries that have worked harder, done more, and done better to try to bring themselves together and change history and change the future" (Lee, 2013). The interplay of these structural and agential factors is represented in a set of catalysts and constraints that are shaping the ongoing dynamics of this relationship.

### **The Development of U.S.-Vietnam Defense Cooperation and Its Catalysts**

Such an improvement in Vietnam-U.S. relations over the past 20 years could not have been possible without the development of trust in the field of defense cooperation. Bilateral defense cooperation has increased slowly but steadily and there is much potential for further development. As with any bilateral relations, political trust is not just measured by the level of economic cooperation, reflected in investments or trade volumes, but by the scope, substance, and quality of defense cooperation, and Vietnam-U.S. defense cooperation is no exception to this rule.

During the first few years of the normalization of ties, U.S.-Vietnam defense cooperation mainly focused on resolving the wartime legacy such as the POW/MIA and Agent Orange issues. Progress in these areas created momentum for broadening the scope of defense cooperation.<sup>1</sup> In the later years, Vietnam-U.S. relations have shifted dramatically from focusing only on one issue to a full-fledged relationship. While defense cooperation between the two countries has developed more slowly compared to other areas, it is now visibly progressing.

The U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Defense Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed in 2011 was the first milestone in Vietnam-U.S. defense cooperation. Five important areas in the MOU include initiatives on maritime security cooperation, high-level defense dialogues, search and rescue programs, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and United Nations peacekeeping operations. This paved the way for U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta to visit Cam Ranh Bay in June 2012 and to negotiate for increased U.S. naval access for more port visits. The United States also signed an agreement with Vietnam in late 2013 to provide formal training to the Vietnamese coastguard as a means of signaling to other regional parties an increased Vietnamese-American joint capacity to coordinate in response to intensified maritime tensions in the South China Sea.

Since the signing of the MOU, defense cooperation between Vietnam and the United States has made great progress. This can be seen in the number of high-level defense dialogues between the two countries that have been established, for example the Defense Policy Dialogue, the Bilateral Defense Dialogue, and the Service Talks through the Army, Navy, Air Force, and State Partnership Program. High-level visits have also increased, as exemplified by the visits to Vietnam by the U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Martin Dempsey, in August 2014, and by the U.S. Secretary of the Navy, Ray Mabus, in April 2015. In the area of search and rescue programs and initiatives, the United States and Vietnam collaborated on the search for Malaysia Airlines Flight MH 370 which

disappeared in March 2014. Regarding United Nations peacekeeping operation initiatives, the United States helped Vietnam to construct a US\$3.1 million training facility and provided training equipment for engineers and a hospital. The U.S. Defense Department is now scheduled to deploy a peacekeeping expert at the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi to facilitate Vietnamese military personnel for future United Nations peacekeeping assignments (Pellerin, 2015).

Military collaboration has been particularly effective when undertaking “non traditional security” missions. Cooperation in this field is facilitated by a series of agreements that the two governments have concluded in the past decade, including a bilateral search and rescue agreement in 2002, a counter-narcotics letter of agreement in 2006, a bilateral maritime agreement in 2007, and the Megaports Agreement in 2010 to better identify weapons of mass destruction components in maritime shipping (Wester, 2013). Translating these agreements into practice, noncombat exercises between the two navies have been conducted annually in recent years, focusing on military medicine, search and rescue, and shipboard damage control. Alongside the exercises, a symposium on military operations and law was held at Danang University in April 2014 to discuss maritime security topics such as counter-piracy. As Lieutenant Commander Clay Doss, a U.S. Navy public affairs officer, recently observed: “The quality and depth of the exchanges is increasing each year as our navies get to know each other better” (Boudreau, 2014).

Since December 2013, the United States has also committed to provide US\$18 million in new assistance to Vietnam (accounting for more than half of its US\$32.5 million assistance for Southeast Asia) for enhancing the capacity of coastal patrol units to deploy rapidly for search and rescue, disaster response, and provision of fast patrol vessels to the Vietnamese Coast Guard (U.S. Department of State, 2013). In addition, with support from both the U.S. Coast Guard and the Department of State, a training facility with a focus on maritime law enforcement is being constructed in Vietnam’s northern city of Haiphong (Wester, 2013). On May 31, 2015, after touring a Vietnamese Coast Guard vessel ravaged during the 2014 confrontation with Chinese ships in Vietnam’s claimed exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea, U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter confirmed that Vietnam will receive more funds to acquire American-made patrol vessels to enhance its maritime enforcement capabilities. As he stated, after 20 years, “we need to modernize our partnership,” and “there is more we could do together” (Alexander, 2015).

The visit by Defense Secretary Carter to Vietnam in mid-2015 signifies another milestone in Vietnam-U.S. defense cooperation. At this time, Vietnam and the United States agreed to upgrade their MOU on defense cooperation with a Joint Vision Statement. The most crucial component of the statement was raising the possibility of co-production of weapons and defense supplies, which would help Hanoi become more independent in satisfying its defense needs. This is important given that Vietnam currently buys around 90% of its defense equipment imports from Russia. Accordingly, the agreement with the United States means that Vietnam can “wean itself off of a sole-source provider” for the procurement of external defense systems (Mehta, 2015).

As we can see from the above, there has been a steady evolution of defense cooperation between Vietnam and the United States over the past 20 years.



Without a doubt, this progress has its roots in the changing geopolitics in Asia, particularly the rise of China and its growing assertiveness in territorial disputes that challenges American primacy and the security interests of its allies in Asia. As a counter measure, the United States initiated the strategy of rebalancing or the pivot to Asia to strengthen and broaden the scope and substance of its Asian alliances and partnerships to deal with China's rise. Having its own past strategic conflicts and its current territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea, Vietnam is increasingly seen as a "natural ally" or "security partner" in the design of the U.S. pivot to Asia. Nonetheless, thus far Vietnam has not acted in a way that realists would have expected or as it did during the Cold War, that is, it has not entered a formal alliance or forged a "strategic partnership" with the United States to counter China's threat. Here, we argue that geopolitical concerns do matter, but that states have an agency role that would help strengthen or lessen the impact of such structural causes. In the case of U.S.-Vietnam security relations, those agential factors are largely two-fold: how both countries learn from the lessons of history in designing their contemporary policy toward one another; and how they converge and diverge in the interpretation of threat perceptions and national interests amid changes in the international and regional order. We first analyze the six catalysts for U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation, and then in the following section, discuss three restraints that stem from the interplay of structural and agential factors.

First, security cooperation between Vietnam and the United States is an integral component of overall relations; therefore, it benefits from the developments in other aspects of the relationship. In all these areas, there are positive developments which in turn are conducive for strengthening the defense relationship. In economics, Vietnam-U.S. bilateral trade has increased 200-fold as their normalization of ties, making the United States a leading trade partner and the largest export market for Vietnamese products. In 2008, the United States invited Vietnam, the only non capitalist country, to join its group of negotiating countries for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement, which is widely seen as an economic component of its pivot to Asia. In education and training, with 16,579 students, Vietnam has the eighth largest number of international students in the United States (and ranks sixth among all Asian countries) (Institute of International Education, 2014).

Importantly, despite the war memory, Vietnamese public opinion toward the United States and bilateral relations overall is strikingly encouraging. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2014, p. 37) during a time when Vietnam was facing deteriorating territorial disputes with China, 76% of the Vietnamese held favorable views of the United States, only slightly lower than their favorability toward Japan (77%), and much higher than their positive opinion toward China (16%). Interestingly, this number is even higher than the U.S. favorability rate in those Asian countries which have forged long-term alliances with the United States, that is, Japan (66%), and Thailand (73%). Given that nationalism and historical issues have become a strategic liability for the Sino-Japanese-Korean security relationship and even for Sino-Vietnamese relations, it is fortunate indeed that historical issues have not been a destructive factor in the case of U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation.

Second, Vietnam and the United States share many interests and views about bilateral, regional, and international security issues. Bilaterally, the United States supports an independent and peaceful Vietnam that can maintain its unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, and that can channel its active diplomacy in the region and the world. Regionally, the United States wants a unified and strong ASEAN where Vietnam can play an active role in projecting the Association's centrality in building regional institutions and architectures. In regard to territorial disputes in the South China Sea, the United States and Vietnam share the view that such differences should be resolved through peaceful means and through the nonuse or threat of force, and that resolution of disputes must conform with international law, especially the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (this issue is discussed more extensively below). On international security issues, Vietnam has worked with the United States in combating international terrorism and nuclear proliferation by signing the a civilian nuclear agreement which complies with Section 123 of the U.S. *Atomic Energy Act* and the Proliferation Security Initiative.

Third, increasingly, the two countries share interests in the South China Sea issue. To date, Vietnam regards the South China Sea territorial dispute as one of its most serious national security challenges (Ministry of National Defence, 2009). The United States, meanwhile, has delivered the strongest statements in favor of Vietnam's security interests. Despite declaring neutrality on the territorial question, the United States sees that the issue is approaching a dangerous redline. Freedom of navigation and aviation in the South China Sea, in particular, is a matter of particular U.S. concern since nearly 50% of global trade depends on maritime security in the South China Sea, and the rival territorial claims in the area not only have bilateral or regional security implications, but also global ones. Therefore, the United States was one of the first and firmest voices regarding territorial disputes and security in the South China Sea. The United States' stance is in line with the security interests of regional countries including Vietnam and the international community. With its long coastline directly facing the South China Sea, relatively sizable maritime forces, and historical experience in dealing with China and other great powers, Vietnam is clearly an important strategic player in maintaining the balance of power in this maritime locale. In light of this, enhancing Vietnam's capability to defend its own security and territory has become a matter of mutual interest for Hanoi and Washington. Thus, this is one of the most important commonalities that has lent impetus for recent maritime security cooperation between the United States and Vietnam. Examples include the United States' decision to partially lift the ban on lethal arms sales to Vietnam and to provide five to six high-speed patrol vessels to help the latter's coastguard forces increase its ability to control its maritime domain and safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity (Hiebert, Nguyen, & Poling, 2014).

Fourth, the United States' perspective on Vietnam's role and influence in the region and around the world is an important policy catalyst. Vietnam has embraced a greater international role as evidenced by the 11th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam's affirmation in January 2011 that Vietnam is ready to play a more proactive, active, and responsible role in regional and international issues. Those responsibilities can be fulfilled by making a



contribution toward protecting regional and international peace through words and actions. Vietnam knows that cooperation with the United States is an important factor (albeit perhaps not a totally decisive one) in better fulfilling its international responsibilities. Illustrative was Vietnam's status as a nonpermanent member of the United Nations Security Council for the 2008–2010 term. In addition, when Vietnam held the ASEAN presidency in 2010, it initiated the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus security dialogue channel that initially met three times a year (now twice a year) between ASEAN Defense Ministers and their counterparts from important ASEAN partners. This initiative was warmly received by the United States (Bower, 2010).

Fifth, the United States and Vietnam increasingly understand one another's "comfort zone." Through their enhanced interactions, both countries are now more aware of the nature of the other side's security concerns, and devote adequate attention to managing them. In various official and unofficial exchanges, U.S. officials and scholars have stated that they understand "Vietnam's delicacy" about defense cooperation with the United States and that the United States should be patient with the pace at which the Vietnamese are "comfortable" (private conversations). In light of this, Washington and Hanoi do not articulate overly ambitious goals for the evolution of their security relationship. It is clear that Vietnam-U.S. relations have a painful history. The past is still an unhealed wound which demands that relations and political trust continue to be cultivated. As a result, both Vietnam and the United States have worked hard to understand and listen to one another's concerns and security sensitivities to continue developing better relations. Hence, both countries suggest very modest goals, such that cooperation, results, and confidence over the next year must be better than in the previous year. This is why bilateral defense relations have progressed in a gradual manner and are not prone to dramatic breakthroughs, and accordingly, improvement in relations are built on a stable foundation. It should also be noted that Vietnam-U.S. defense cooperation began from a very low base, and so potential for cooperation was high.

Sixth, another favorable condition that further promotes Vietnam-U.S. defense relations beyond their bilateral framework is the fact that they have many common friends and strategic partners in the region. Almost all the countries within the system of the U.S. alliance and partnership in Asia are also Vietnam's strategic or comprehensive partners. These include, among others, Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, and Thailand.<sup>2</sup> This allows the United States and Vietnam to broaden the scope of their defense cooperation to a trilateral or quadrilateral level. For instance, the United States and Australia have joined hands in assisting Vietnam to develop English language and peacekeeping and stabilization skills for its troops to take part in United Nations peacekeeping missions (Nicholson, 2013).<sup>3</sup>

The most promising trilateral framework among these is perhaps that between Japan, the United States, and Vietnam. In 2011 and 2012, a number of Japanese and American scholars and other observers first speculated about a trilateral strategic security cooperative mechanism involving Vietnam that combines both Track 1 and Track 1.5 cooperative activities focusing on maritime security, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and trilateral conferences on

security issues of mutual concerns (Matsubara et al. 2012; Mori & Nishihara 2013). Like the United States, Japan has provided Vietnam with patrol vessels and has helped enhance capacity building for Vietnam's maritime law enforcement forces. Washington and Tokyo also share a great interest in assisting Vietnam in nuclear energy and Mekong subregional development (Mori & Nishihara, 2013; Parameswaran, 2015). On the Vietnamese side, scholars and practitioners Hoang Anh Tuan and Nguyen Vu Tung (2015, p. 36) from the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam have made suggestion significant proposal:

There should be an expansion of the U.S.–Japan security alliance to incorporate a third party in policy discussions and coordination, information sharing, and so on; some prime examples of such cooperation are the U.S.–Japan–Australia Dialogue and the U.S.–Japan–India Dialogue. In the future, the United States and Japan should consider the creation of a dialogue mechanism, such as one that involves the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and even China, with the U.S.–Japan alliance serving as the core.

Although the scope and substance of this kind of “minilateral” security mechanism cannot be overstated at this stage, largely because of all parties' concern that it may create a security dilemma with China, such a framework may eventually contribute to consolidating and broadening the regional security architecture which thus far relies on two seemingly divergent pillars—the U.S. “hub-and-spokes” network of bilateral alliances on the one hand, and ASEAN-led soft multilateralism on the other.

### **Constraints on Vietnam-U.S. Security Cooperation**

Although the United States and Vietnam share many common viewpoints, defense cooperation between the two still exhibits differences and limitations. There are three main obstacles to this. First, differences still exist in regard to the assessment of threats in the region, which thereby shapes the level of security–defense cooperation. It is important here to make note of China's role. For the past 1,000 years, well before the United States assumed a powerful role in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific, Vietnam addressed the Chinese security threat on its own. While maintaining that security challenges in the South China Sea, caused by China's assertive policies, are the greatest security issue, Vietnamese leaders also believe that these challenges can be overcome by active engagement with China. And that is not to mention the geographical proximity and ideological similarity between the two countries. By this reasoning, engagement, as opposed to confrontation, would allow China to see the benefits of regional peace and cooperation. Therefore, Vietnam has devised a policy of “three no's”: no military alliances, no foreign military bases, and no collusion against a third country.

Moreover, haunted by major power dealings in the past such as those between Mao Zedong and Richard Nixon in 1972 regarding peace and unification in Vietnam, Vietnamese leaders are always concerned that a similar agreement could take place in the South China Sea which could harm Vietnam's security. Critically, the United States' recent actions have yet to show genuine substance relative to convergence with Vietnam's core geopolitical interests,

rather than predominantly work to increase an American presence in the region. Although U.S.-China relations have become increasingly tense, this has not made China less assertive, nor pressed China to observe international law, cease land reclamation activities, or stop other actions that have complicated the situation in the South China Sea.

More alarmingly, Washington's ambivalence in defending an ally's interest such as its indecisive behavior during the "Scarborough Shoal" crisis between the Philippines and China in 2012 raises questions about U.S. strategic credibility among smaller regional states. Having learnt from its own lessons in the past when China first launched a 1979 land border war against Vietnam and later successfully overtook Vietnam-controlled islands in the South China Sea in 1988 without any substantial action from its then ally—the Soviet Union—Vietnam has been deeply distrustful of alliance politics allegedly designed to balance or counter Chinese power. That sentiment explains why, despite its acceptance of frequent port calls and high-ranking visits by U.S. military officials to the site, Hanoi continues to reject Washington's proposal to host rotations of U.S. troops and warships in Cam Ranh Bay. That said, there is a visible cap in the extent of Vietnam-U.S. strategic cooperation. Within those parameters, the "China factor" has been and will continue to exert both a push and pull effect on Vietnam's strategic thinking vis-à-vis the United States and its Asian pivot (Do, 2014).

In this context, Vietnam's ongoing policy in the triangular relationship between China, the United States, and itself is to strengthen security-defense cooperation with the United States and, at the same time, actively engage China while implementing an external security-defense posture of independence and self-reliance. The aim is to walk the tightrope carefully in its strategic collaborations with the United States and its ASEAN partners "so that it can be seen as acting independently while keeping options open with China" (Hoang, 2012).

Second, there still remain war legacy issues, and a lack of trust and differences regarding democracy, human rights, and religion. In the U.S. Congress, there are many who want to monitor democracy and human rights in Vietnam as well as support of political organizations that could oppose the further cultivation of future Vietnam-U.S. ties. This leads to concerns about peaceful evolution and regime change. Thus, there are always two sides to Vietnam-U.S. defense cooperation. On the one hand, cooperation reinforces Vietnam's defense capabilities against external threats, and on the other hand, it potentially weakens the Vietnamese government's capability to exercise and project self-reliant defense policies. In light of this, Vietnam's approach to defense cooperation is a cautious step-by-step process, in accordance with a commensurate deepening of bilateral trust. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Vietnam-U.S. relations have already reached a mature stage where both countries can discuss their differences and prevent them from obstructing bilateral relations in the future.

Third, the continued rise of China and heightened Sino-U.S. strategic competition at the regional level will make it increasingly harder for non allied ASEAN members (Vietnam included) and ASEAN itself to retain their current "hedging" strategy. In recent times, China has promoted a number of initiatives rivalling U.S.-supported existing institutions (TPP, APEC), such as the Regional

Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank that have attracted the attention of many regional countries. Beijing also actively sought to expand its influence within ASEAN and to weaken the Association so that the latter does not have a common and unified voice regarding the South China Sea issue. An example of Chinese activity in this regard was ASEAN's failure to issue a Joint Statement on the South China Sea at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Cambodia in July 2012. When U.S.-China relations are strained, ASEAN faces the possibility of division and polarization. If anything, it recalls a similar period when the region was deeply divided over the Cambodian conflict amid Sino-Soviet strategic competition. Having numerous bitter experiences of being a victim of great power rivalry in history, Vietnam (and other ASEAN members) will have to calibrate their overall foreign policy and security ties with the United States cautiously by looking at the big picture of the changing regional order so as not to repeat the tragedy of the past.

### **Conclusion**

As this article has pointed out, the roots of U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation can be traced back to before the end of the Second World War. Nonetheless, given the complex international and regional circumstances during the Cold War, the two countries experienced a miserable war and a long process toward normalization of ties. Contemporary U.S.-Vietnam security and defense cooperation is still young, but it has been growing steadily since the re-establishment of diplomatic relations in 1995. Although inherent limits are foreseeable, there is also room and optimism for tapping the potential of this bilateral relationship.

Looking at the catalysts and constraints on U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation over time, it can be seen that they are a combination or interplay of both structural and agential factors. The U.S.-Vietnam relationship during the Cold War was driven mainly by structural concerns, and the United States' and Vietnam's strategic behavior during that time fits in with the realist logic of a balance of power. The end of the Cold War in 1991, however, lessened the monopoly of structural factors in shaping this strategic relationship. Although structural causes stemming from shared concerns about the rise of China and its assertiveness in territorial disputes continue to be the key underlying factor for deepening U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation in the post-Cold War era, the agency role played by Vietnam and the United States in learning from the lessons of history and past mistakes, and in designing their strategic choices, also contributes to forging the dynamics of U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation to a degree of mutual acceptability. In light of this, the United States and Vietnam can better play their agency role to strengthen their security cooperation in the future. Concrete measures toward this end are suggested as follows.

First, the United States should help Vietnam and ASEAN become stronger and more integrated within the region in terms of economics, security, and politics. Only by developing economic strength can Vietnam be assured of effectively tackling security challenges and serve as a foundation for more extensive security-defense cooperation with the United States. The TPP should not be seen only as an economic tool but also as a strategic move for Vietnam to enhance its economic and commercial power, to intertwine with the United

States economically and strategically as well as to underpin the peace, security, and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region.

Second, the United States should understand that Vietnam does not want to take part in the geopolitical game of confronting China for opposition's sake. Yet, it also does not want to become highly dependent on China or to be bullied by it. Thus, it is Vietnam's hope that the United States and regional countries will continue to actively engage China, but balance such engagement by deterring China from becoming too assertive with neighboring countries or to pursue its economic, security, and diplomatic hegemony at its neighbors' expense.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the United States should not be hesitant in taking a lead role in persuading other actors inside and outside the South China Sea to turn those waters into an area of peace. It should be forthright in asking concerned parties to work toward resolving disputes in the area on the basis of international law and UNCLOS, and to refrain from the use or threat of force. In the short-term, the United States should lead international efforts in backing other regional claimants in the South China Sea dispute to induce or compel China into stopping its land reclamation and expansion activities and from changing the South China Sea's status quo. The United States should also play an active role, along with regional and international parties in ascertaining how to "neutralize" ownership of these artificial islands. If even partial success is realized in meeting this objective, the prospects for the United States and Vietnam to broaden their overall bilateral ties beyond the short-term imperative of stabilizing offshore Southeast Asia will intensify and, over time, residual historical and ideological tensions can be genuinely tempered by progress in realizing a deeper partnership based on its own merits.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>As of August 31, 2015, 705 American POW/MIA in Vietnam have been accounted for, while the status of more than 1,000 others remains unclear (Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, 2015).

<sup>2</sup>Vietnam and the Philippines do not have a comprehensive or strategic partnership as of yet. Nonetheless, given their recent common concerns over Chinese-enhanced assertiveness in the South China Sea disputes, Hanoi and Manila have agreed to step up negotiations for a strategic partnership since early 2015 (Vnexpress, 2015). Closer defense and security cooperation between Vietnam and the Philippines, especially in the maritime domain, could possibly encourage the United States and Japan to participate in trilateral or quadrilateral maritime cooperation (given Tokyo's recent expression of interest in conducting reconnaissance flights over the South China Sea) (Thayer, 2015).

<sup>3</sup>India and Japan have also pledged to assist Vietnam in training its peacekeeping troops, so expanded multilateral cooperation between Vietnam and these powers on this issue can be expected in the future.

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