



TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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UNDERSTANDING VIETNAM'S FOREIGN POLICY CHOICES AMID SINO-US RIVALRY

Hoang Thi Ha

ISSUE

16

2024

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Published by: ISEAS Publishing
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614
publish@iseas.edu.sg
<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

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ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Hoang, Thi Ha, author.

Title: Understanding Vietnam's foreign policy choices amid Sino-US rivalry
/ by Hoang Thi Ha.

Description: Singapore : ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, May 2024. |
Series: Trends in Southeast Asia, ISSN 0219-3213 ; TRS16/24 | Includes
bibliographical references.

Identifiers: ISBN 9789815203639 (soft cover) | ISBN 9789815203646
(ebook PDF)

Subjects: LCSH: Vietnam--Foreign relations. | Vietnam—Politics and
government. | China—Foreign relations—United States. | United States--
Foreign relations—China.

Classification: DS501 I59T no. 16(2024)

Typeset by Superskill Graphics Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Understanding Vietnam's Foreign Policy Choices Amid Sino-US Rivalry

By Hoang Thi Ha

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Vietnam's foreign policy towards China and the United States (US) involves a delicate process of reconciling and balancing competing perceptions, goals and interests within the country. This leads to foreign policy decisions that may respectively lean towards either China or the US, depending on specific circumstances and issues, while trying to maintain an overall equilibrium between the two powers.
- Vietnam's foreign policy adopts the paradigm of "cooperation" and "struggle" in its relations with major powers, and defines "national security" as encompassing both national sovereignty and regime security.
- Given the common ideology and imperative of preserving political control of their respective communist parties, China may be a critical partner for Vietnam in terms of regime security but is often an "object of struggle" on national sovereignty. On the other hand, the US is Vietnam's partner in the South China Sea but an "object of struggle" when it comes to regime security.
- The Vietnamese public's favourable sentiments towards the US, contrasted with their distrust towards China, pose a challenge for the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) in mobilizing public opinion to bolster its legitimacy while preventing any potential threat to its political authority.
- A friendly relationship with China is essential for Vietnam's favourable external environment, warranting Hanoi's accommodation and deference to Beijing on non-critical issues. However, it has meticulously avoided dependencies and

vulnerabilities to China through diversifying economic ties and engaging in “soft balancing” with other powers and through ASEAN. Party-to-party links provide China with powerful access to Vietnamese leaders, but the US is catching up by giving assurances to respect Vietnam’s political system, and strengthening “party diplomacy” with the CPV.

- In its relationship with the US, Vietnam prioritizes economic ties, addressing war legacy issues, leveraging US support to build capacities in traditional and non-traditional security, and avoiding geopolitical posturing that could provoke China.
- Vietnam-US relations are characterized by pragmatism, with both sides prioritizing shared geopolitical and economic interests over ideological differences. The sustainability of this approach is uncertain, given the CPV’s tightening of domestic control and the “securitization of the Vietnamese state” in the anti-corruption campaign.
- Vietnam has thus far benefited from the US-China rivalry but it faces substantial challenges ahead, including heightened vulnerabilities to an assertive China in the South China Sea and Lower Mekong, potential trade tensions if Donald Trump is re-elected as US president, and risks in balancing its ideological ties with Beijing while maintaining its strategic alignment with the US.

Understanding Vietnam’s Foreign Policy Choices Amid Sino-US Rivalry

Hoang Thi Ha¹

INTRODUCTION

Vietnam’s relations with China and the United States (US) are full of contrasts and complexities. The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and the Communist Party of China (CPC) share the same political ideology and the prevailing imperative of preserving their power monopoly. Yet, China presents the most pronounced threat to Vietnam’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, and opinion polls consistently suggest a prevalent distrust of China among the Vietnamese. Polls also indicate that the US is favourably perceived by the Vietnamese public but the CPV views Washington’s promotion of liberal democratic values with deep apprehension, out of concern for its regime security. The CPV keenly learns from the CPC’s development path and governance model whereas young Vietnamese—including children of the ruling elites—often choose the US and other Western countries over China for their education.² Historically, Vietnam had been at war with both great powers. In fact, it is the classic example of a small “David” that defied all odds to survive as an independent state under the Chinese imperial shadow over millennia and to prevail over the American “Goliath” in the twentieth

¹ Hoang Thi Ha is Senior Fellow and Co-coordinator of the Regional Strategic and Political Studies Programme at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

² The US is consistently ranked the top choice for tertiary education in a foreign country among Vietnamese respondents, according to the annual State of Southeast Asia Survey (various issues, 2019–2023), published by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/category/articles-commentaries/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/>

century. Today, Vietnam's most important trade partners are China and the US, with China being the main source of imports and the US serving as its largest export market.

As US-China strategic competition intensifies, where does Vietnam stand between the two rivals, and how does it navigate the above contrasts and complexities that essentially represent its internal competing perceptions, goals and interests in relation to the two powers? This article seeks to answer these questions by examining the domestic determinants of Vietnam's foreign policy, including geographical, historical, political, institutional, economic and security considerations.

The focus on domestic determinants to understand the making of small states' foreign policy is part of the "counter-current" to the great-power-centric paradigm that is prevalent in the realist school of thought and general international relations commentary.³ This great-power bias emphasizes the structural constraints of the international system on small states, according to Thucydides' logic that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must". It neglects the agency of small states and unique domestic conditions that differentiate one state's foreign policy decisions from another's. Understanding the domestic conditions also helps us look beyond the simplistic categorization of "band-wagoning", "balance of power" and "hedging" to grasp the full gamut of a country's foreign policy choices in its dealing with great powers.

The article is structured as follows. The first section examines the domestic determinants of Vietnam's foreign policy, including geographical and historical factors, domestic politics and the economic and security goals set by the Vietnamese party-state. The second section shows how these factors contribute to Vietnam's "cooperation and struggle" approach towards China and the US, which is issue-based and evolving over time. The conclusion discusses the outlook of Vietnam's

³ Tom Long, *A Small State's Guide to Influence in World Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190926205.001.0001>

pursuit of its interests amid the US-China rivalry and mounting domestic political challenges.

DOMESTIC DETERMINANTS OF VIETNAM'S FOREIGN POLICY

Are History and Geography Destiny?

The Vietnamese people have a long history of nation-building; their national identity was forged through a thousand-year struggle against Chinese rule from 111 BC to 938 AD. In the centuries following the formation of the first Vietnamese independent state in 939, Vietnam had to continue to resist multiple Chinese invasions under the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. Vietnamese textbooks describe and define the country's premodern history mainly through the lens of this constant struggle.

At the same time, the development of the Vietnamese state has been heavily influenced by Chinese political culture and institutions. The premodern Vietnamese state was modelled on the Chinese state, including the royal court, the state administration based on civil service examination, and Confucianism-infused morality and statecraft. Vietnam stood out from the rest of Southeast Asia as the most Sinicized polity, often assuming a subordinate position to imperial Chinese dynasties in a Sino-centric East Asian world. At the popular level, Chinese cultural influence also makes up “a layer of Vietnam's cultural identity” with necessary modification, adaptation and indigenization.⁴ Yet, despite centuries of cultural assimilation and ethnic cross-pollination, the Vietnamese continue to identify themselves as a nationality distinct from the Chinese; because of this distinct nationality, cultural affinity has been of little effect in mediating the estrangement between the two countries during times of bilateral tension and conflict.

⁴ Le Hong Hiep, “Vietnam Confronts the Chinese ‘Charm Offensive’”, *East Asia Forum*, 1 February 2012, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/02/01/vietnam-confronts-the-chinese-charm-offensive/>

The duality of China as both a threat and an example is deeply ingrained in the Vietnamese consciousness. On the one hand, historical experiences of continual resistance against Chinese suzerainty and territorial expansionism explain the deep distrust among the Vietnamese towards their northern neighbour, which remains palpable today.⁵ On the other hand, the Vietnamese ruling elites keep looking to China for ideas, solutions and models in their statecraft and political doctrine, from Confucianism in the past to communism during the Cold War and the “market economy with socialist characteristics” today.⁵ As remarked by Howard W. French, “Ruling Vietnam then, and many would say now, required a careful balancing act between independence and deference, between local authenticity and the embrace of northern ways.”⁶ China’s dual role as both an imposing neighbour and an ideational, cultural and political inspiration underlines the duality of resistance and deference, independence and accommodation, cooperation and struggle in the Vietnamese approach to its relations with Beijing.

Vietnam’s nationalism was solidified in the early twentieth century with the awakening of colonized peoples to their right of self-determination and the rise of national liberation movements worldwide as well as the multiple wars Vietnam fought with the French, Japanese, American and Chinese in the twentieth century. The Westphalian concept of sovereignty provided the fundamental paradigm shift for Vietnam to come out of the Sino-centric tributary world. Vietnam’s political history

⁵ According to Pew’s 2017 Global Attitudes Survey, 80 per cent of Vietnamese respondents viewed China’s power and influence as a major threat to global peace and security versus 21 per cent feeling the same about the US. Vietnam was the only country in the poll that identified China as the top global threat. See Gregory B. Poling and Andreyka Natalegawa, “Assessing U.S. and Chinese Influence in Southeast Asia”, *CSIS Report*, August 2023, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-08/230807_Poling_Influence_SoutheastAsia.pdf?VersionId=eJgGM04iKBt0Y19fWu.co9bdSNj44rFc. This public sentiment is also mirrored in the elite-centric State of Southeast Asia Survey.

⁶ Howard W. French, *Everything Under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China’s Push for Global Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), p. 132.

is now mainstreamed into the modern international system anchored in the principles of sovereign equality.

In contrast to the two millennia of Sino-Vietnamese interactions, American engagement with Vietnam has not even exceeded 100 years. Ho Chi Minh's Declaration of Independence, which gave birth to the modern Vietnamese state in 1945, quoted the 1776 Declaration of Independence of the US, stating that "All men are created equal; they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." Ho's main message, however, was the elevation of these individual rights to the collective level so as to serve the cause of national liberation: "In a broader sense, this means: All the peoples on the earth are equal from birth, all the peoples have a right to live, to be happy and free."⁷ This nuanced extrapolation would underline a fundamental difference in the Vietnamese and American approaches to nation-building until the present day: for the former, the collective always takes precedence over the individual.

Other than its violent intervention during the Vietnam War between 1954 and 1975, Washington historically did not put Vietnam on its strategic radar, and "tended to see Vietnam as important only in relation to other interests".⁸ US assistance to communist-led Viet Minh forces in fighting the Japanese in Indochina was meant to complement Britain's war effort during World War II in Southeast Asia. Washington provided aid to French attempts to recolonize Vietnam between 1946 and 1954 on the grounds that such assistance was necessary to enable France to fulfil its military commitments in Europe. Then US' tragic involvement in the Vietnam War was driven by its zealous containment of communism as guided by the "falling domino" principle.⁹ In the following decades, the

⁷ Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1945, <https://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5139/>

⁸ Henry J. Kenny, *Shadow of the Dragon: Vietnam's Continuing Struggle with China and Its Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy* (Virginia: Brassey's, 2002), p. 2.

⁹ Department of State of the United States of America, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, Indochina, Volume XIII, Part 1, Historical Documents", <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v13p1/d716>

US led international efforts to economically and diplomatically isolate Vietnam due to the latter's military intervention in Cambodia and quasi-alliance with the Soviet Union. In the first two decades after the Cold War, the US took a liberal approach towards Vietnam, emphasizing the universality of human rights and democratic values. This led to criticisms of Vietnam's human rights record and the imposition of values-based conditions on bilateral relations. Today, as Washington seeks to strengthen its ties with Hanoi against the backdrop of the US-China rivalry, Hanoi may wonder whether it will be side-lined again once its strategic value to Washington diminishes.

The Mainland-Maritime Nexus

In terms of strategic thinking and security outlook, the duality of Vietnam as both a continental and maritime state has given rise to a recent debate about the future orientation of Vietnam's grand strategy. Alex Vuving rightly points out that "the land-sea binary does not define real strategic choices in Vietnam's national defence, nor does it pose a genuine dilemma for Vietnam's strategists."¹⁰ However, there is policy-relevant utility in this debate because where the emphasis lies—continental or maritime—would entail the allocation of Vietnam's defence resources and influence its strategic disposition towards China and the US.

According to Euan Graham and Bich Tran, "despite a strong landwards pull in Vietnam's history, Hanoi has latterly and perhaps decisively adopted a maritime course" as demonstrated in the 2019 defence white paper which declares Vietnam a maritime nation.¹¹ Given the salience of the South China Sea dispute in Vietnam's contemporary foreign policy and the importance of offshore hydrocarbons and maritime trade routes to its economy, the maritime orientation has gained greater prominence

¹⁰ Alex Vuving, "Is Vietnam Torn Between Land and Sea in Its Defense?", *The Diplomat*, 6 January 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/is-vietnam-torn-between-land-and-sea-in-its-defense/>

¹¹ Euan Graham and Bich T. Tran, "Why a Maritime Focus Is Vital for Vietnam's Security", *The Strategist*, 6 October 2022, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/why-a-maritime-focus-is-vital-for-vietnams-security/>

in Vietnam’s strategic discourse in the post-Cold War era, leading to a more hostile stance towards China in the South China Sea and a closer relationship with the US as a balancing force in the region.

However, despite its growing maritime orientation, Vietnam’s strategic outlook and defence posture are historically land-oriented, and it remains so in the foreseeable future. The Vietnamese People’s Army (VPA) is heavily structured towards fighting land wars—with army personnel (400,000) overwhelmingly outnumbering navy personnel (40,000).¹² Among approximately 400 general-grade officers in the VPA, only less than 10 per cent are from the navy and coast guard.¹³ While today’s literature about Vietnam’s foreign policy primarily focuses on its maritime security concerns in the South China Sea, the reality is that Vietnamese strategic planners have to devote much of their attention and assets to ensuring peaceful and secure borderlands with the neighbouring countries. Unlike other Southeast Asian claimant states, Vietnam will still have to keep an eye on its northern land border when tensions with China rise in the maritime domain.

China’s strategic inroads into Laos and Cambodia also complicate Vietnam’s security environment. China’s economic and security footprint in the Lower Mekong has never been as prevalent as it is at present, with enhanced highway and railway connectivity, including the recently launched China-Laos railway and regular Mekong River joint patrol between the Chinese, Thai, Lao and Myanmar law enforcement forces.¹⁴

¹² “KYR: Vietnam – Military”, *The Cove*, 20 October 2021, <https://cove.army.gov.au/article/kyr-vietnam-military>

¹³ Author’s interview with a Vietnamese military officer, March 2023.

¹⁴ See Toru Takahashi, “Ambition, Concern Drive Lao-China High-Speed Rail Project”, *Nikkei Asia*, 14 January 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/Ambition-concern-drive-Lao-China-high-speed-rail-project>; “125th joint patrol of Mekong River concludes”, *The Star*, 18 January 2023, <https://www.thestar.com.my/aseanplus/aseanplus-news/2023/01/18/125th-joint-patrol-of-mekongriver-concludes>; and Martin Purbrick, “Future Global Policeman? The Growing Extraterritorial Reach of PRC Law Enforcement”, *China Brief*, Vol. 2, Issue 9, 13 May 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/futureglobal-policeman-the-growing-extraterritorial-reach-of-prc-law-enforcement/>

The most alarming development for Vietnam from a conventional security perspective is China's reported exclusive access to Cambodia's Ream naval base, which would technically enable a Chinese blockade of the southern Vietnamese coast "in a matter of hours".¹⁵ China's policy of "siding with smaller neighbouring states in order to constrain Vietnam's growing geopolitical ambitions" has a long history tracing back to the Ming dynasty's assistance to Champa during Dai Viet's southward conquest in the fifteenth century.¹⁶ Its most recent rendition was China's support to the Khmer Rouge in the Vietnam-Cambodia border war in 1978. The lesson learned from these historical experiences—i.e., precluding a united front of hostile foreign forces on both the northern and southwestern flanks—is not lost on today's Vietnamese leadership. Therefore, even as a maritime orientation is increasingly salient for its security outlook, the traditional landward focus remains prevalent in Vietnam's strategic thinking and military planning.¹⁷

Foreign Policy as an Extension of Domestic Politics

Every analysis of Vietnam's foreign policy must begin with its domestic political structure—a single-party regime led by the CPV, which sees its regime security as integral to national security and its survival indispensable to the nation's well-being. Strategic directives for Vietnam's foreign policy are formulated and updated during the CPV's national congresses convened every five years. While the specificity

¹⁵ Loro Horta, "Vietnam Eyes China's Expanding Presence in Cambodia", *East Asia Forum*, 16 August 2022, <https://www.easiaforum.org/2022/08/16/vietnam-eyes-chinas-expanding-presence-in-cambodia/>

¹⁶ Howard W. French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, p. 138.

¹⁷ For more arguments about Vietnam's landward strategic outlook, see Khang Vu, "How Vietnam Can Balance Against China, on Land and at Sea", *The Diplomat*, 16 December 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/how-vietnam-can-balance-against-china-on-land-and-at-sea/>; Khang Vu, "Land Before Water: Why Vietnam's Grand Strategy is Fundamentally Continental", *The Diplomat*, 22 February 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/land-before-water-why-vietnams-grand-strategy-is-fundamentally-continental/>

and nuance may be refined over time, the foundational direction of Vietnam’s contemporary foreign policy was set by the Party’s Resolution No. 13 in 1988. The resolution underscored the mission of foreign policy as mobilizing international support and cooperation for national development. It was further updated at the CPV’s 7th National Congress in 1991, which emphasized Vietnam’s desire to be friends with all nations, departing from the adversarial bloc mindset of the Cold War era, and later solidified in the country’s foreign policy of “multi-directional diversification”.

Regardless of this overarching directive, dissecting Vietnam’s specific foreign policy decisions and their underlying rationale is challenging due to the opaque nature of the foreign policy-making process. Rationality—i.e., defending and advancing national interests—is the conventional prism to explain Vietnam’s foreign policy. But contingency factors, including the agency of the party leadership, the balancing of diverse perspectives and interests of different stakeholders and agencies within the system, public opinions and the ruling regime’s perceptions of external incentives and threats, also come into play in shaping these decisions.

Communist Kinship: The CPV-CPC Nexus

Vietnam’s domestic political structure plays a crucial role in its foreign policy, particularly in its relationship with China. The CPV and the CPC share the communist ideology and the prevailing objective of preserving their regimes. As two out of the five remaining communist states in the world, they share concerns regarding “peaceful evolution” by “hostile forces” from within and externally.¹⁸ Both countries resist the West’s

¹⁸ Countering “peaceful revolution” and subversion schemes of hostile forces is recognized as part of the national security strategy, according to the Political Report at the 13th National Congress of the Vietnam Communist Party. See “Báo cáo chính trị của Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng khoá XII tại Đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc lần thứ XIII của Đảng” [Political Report of the Party Central Committee at the 13th National Congress of the Party], Vietnam Communist

propagation and imposition of liberal values such as electoral democracy and the emphasis on civil-political rights. The CPV has also been learning from the CPC in terms of party-building, development and governance model, and in preserving its political monopoly.¹⁹ Although the role of ideology in bilateral ties has been de-emphasized in the post-Cold War era, it remains an important factor, not because of the communist revolutionary fervour as during the Cold War but because of the two parties' shared determination to maintain their respective regimes.

The institutionalized party-to-party links with regular high-level exchanges between the CPV and CPC leaders provide China with a powerful conduit to influence the making of Vietnam's foreign policy without having to go through the government-to-government channel. This is a significant advantage that China has over the US and other powers, although Washington is also trying to catch up on this front. CPV-CPC leaders' meetings not only provide the venue for both sides to communicate their strategic reassurances²⁰ but also serve as the "top-level design" to stabilize the relationship when differences or tensions arise on contentious issues, especially regarding the South China Sea. For instance, after China officially introduced its Nine-Dash Line map at the United Nations in 2009, bilateral ties were strained, and Vietnam sought to internationalize the South China Sea issue at the ASEAN fora. Hanoi, however, also needed to stabilize its relationship with China and the visit by CPV General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong to Beijing in October 2011 resulted in an agreement on basic principles for settling

Party website, 23 March 2021, <https://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/ban-chap-hanh-trung-uong-dang/dai-hoi-dang/lan-thu-xiii/bao-cao-chinh-tri-cua-ban-chap-hanh-trung-uong-dang-khoa-xii-tai-dai-hoi-dai-bieu-toan-quoc-lan-thu-xiii-cua-3734>

¹⁹ Lye Liang Fook, "China-Vietnam Party-to-Party Ties: A Tie that Binds", *Fulcrum*, 25 September 2023, <https://fulcrum.sg/china-vietnam-party-to-party-ties-a-tie-that-binds/>

²⁰ Do Thanh Hai, "Vietnam and China: Ideological Bedfellows, Strange Dreamer", *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 10, no. 2 (2021): 162–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2021.1932018>

sea issues. These principles include, among others, “taking the general situation of the two countries’ relationship as the key” and “abiding by agreements and common perceptions reached by their high-ranking leaders”.²¹ China often uses this “big picture” narrative and leaders’ “strategic guidance” to pressure Vietnamese government agencies to make decisions in line with China’s preferences.²² In another example, bilateral ties hit another new low in 2014 due to China’s deployment of an oil rig in Vietnam’s exclusive economic zones (EEZ), and widespread anti-China protests were allowed to take place in the country. When Trong visited China in 2015, his counterpart Xi Jinping reminded him that “(We) must strictly abide by the important consensus the leaders of both parties have reached, jointly properly manage and control maritime disputes, maintain the broader picture of relations and peace and stability in the South China Sea.”²³

The Influence of the Party Leadership

The CPV operates under a collective leadership model but the influence of the CPV general secretary on policy-making and his desire to shape his legacy can significantly impact Vietnam’s foreign policy decisions. This is particularly evident in the current CPV General Secretary, Nguyen Phu Trong, whose anti-corruption campaign has elevated his position within the collective leadership. Trong is known as a conservative ideologue who puts party building and cadre rectification at the centre of his domestic agenda, which has resulted in his reportedly amicable relationship with Chinese leader Xi Jinping. This could also explain

²¹ Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the United States of America, “VN-China Basic Principles on Settlement of Sea Issues”, 14 October 2011, <https://vietnamembassy-usa.org/news/2011/10/vn-china-basic-principles-settlement-sea-issues>

²² Author’s interview with Vietnamese officials, December 2022.

²³ “China, Vietnam Must Manage Sea Dispute Well to Keep Peace: Xi”, *Reuters*, 7 April 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-china-vietnam-idCAKBN0MY1CK20150407>

why Xi invited Trong to be the first foreign leader to visit China right after the CPC's 20th National Congress in October 2022, and Trong's consent to go despite his health condition and the established norm that the first foreign trip of a new/re-elected CPV general secretary should be to Laos.²⁴ The apparent political affinity between Trong and Xi likely played a big part in the higher dose of ideological content in their 2022 joint statement compared to the previous ones, which mentioned for the first time that Vietnam and China will “promote cooperation in the fight against ... ‘peaceful evolution’, ‘colour revolution’”.²⁵

On the other hand, Trong has demonstrated dexterity in navigating the delicate balance between the US and China. He made history as the first CPV general secretary to visit the White House in 2015, marking a milestone in Vietnam-US relations. The relationship also made a spectacular leapfrog from a “comprehensive partnership” to a “comprehensive strategic partnership” under his watch—putting the US now on the same par with China in the hierarchy of Vietnam's external relations. Trong's balancing act between the US and China exemplifies his “Vietnamese bamboo diplomacy” approach, which is being promoted as his foreign policy legacy, alongside the anti-corruption drive on the domestic front. Trong characterizes “Vietnamese bamboo diplomacy” as “soft and wise but still persistent and resolute; flexible and creative but [...] resolute, persistent and patient in safeguarding the national interest”.²⁶ It essentially reaffirms the pragmatism that has underscored Vietnam's foreign policy since the early 1990s. What is noteworthy is

²⁴ Alex Vuving, “Vietnam's Approach to China: Bamboo Diplomacy With Neo-tributary Characteristics”, *The Diplomat*, 12 November 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/11/vietnams-approach-to-china-bamboo-diplomacy-with-neo-tributary-characteristics/>

²⁵ Socialist Republic of Vietnam, “Viet Nam, China Issue Joint Statement”, *Government News*, 2 November 2022, <https://en.baohinhphu.vn/viet-nam-china-issue-joint-statement-11122110208592351.htm>

²⁶ English website of the Government of Vietnam, “Full Speech by Party Leader Nguyen Phu Trong at National Foreign Relations Conference”, 31 December 2021, <https://en.baohinhphu.vn/full-speech-by-party-leader-nguyen-phu-trong-at-national-foreign-relations-conference-11143010.htm>

Trong's continuation of that pragmatism despite his background as a conservative ideologue in domestic politics.

Factional Dynamics Within the System

Many Vietnam experts have argued that the country's contemporary foreign policy is shaped by factional politics within the party-state. This is often framed as a power struggle between the conservatives or ideologues who work for the party apparatus and are generally perceived to have a more pro-China stance and the reformists, pragmatists and technocrats who work for the government and are viewed as leaning more towards the West.²⁷ However, this binary assumption may not be entirely accurate when considering the growing influence of the CPV's Commission for External Relations in facilitating breakthroughs in Vietnam-US relations over the past decade. A notable instance is the pivotal role of the Commission in the elevation of Vietnam-US ties to a "comprehensive strategic partnership" (CSP), which was underscored by the meeting between the Head of the Commission Le Hoai Trung and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Hanoi in April 2023, as well as Trung's subsequent visit to Washington in June 2023.²⁸

²⁷ Do Thanh Hai, "Vietnam and China: Ideological Bedfellows, Strange Dreamer"; Alex Vuving, "The Evolution of Vietnamese Foreign Policy in the Doi Moi Era", in *Vietnam: Navigating a Rapidly Changing Economy, Society, and Political Order*, edited by Borje Ljunggren and Dwight H. Perkins, pp. 347–69 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2023); Carlyle A. Thayer and Ramses Amer, eds., *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000); Nguyen Minh Quang, "The Resurgence of Vietnam-China Ties", *The Diplomat*, 25 January 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/the-resurgence-of-china-vietnam-ties/>; Dien Nguyen An Luong, "U.S. Will Have to Work Hard to Win Over Vietnam's Conservatives", *Nikkei Asia*, 11 May 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/U.S.-will-have-to-work-hard-to-win-over-Vietnam-s-conservatives>

²⁸ Central Commission for External Relations, "Trưởng Ban Đối ngoại Trung ương Lê Hoài Trung tiếp Ngoại trưởng Hoa Kỳ Antony Blinken" [Chairman of the Central Commission for External Relations Le Hoai Trung receives US Secretary of State Antony Blinken], 15 April 2023, <https://bdntw.org.vn/truong>

Within the government itself, the ministries of foreign affairs, industry and trade, national defence and public security are most involved in external relations and national security matters. Due to the nature of their respective portfolios, the foreign affairs and industry and trade ministries (“integrationists”) presumably have a favourable disposition towards strengthening relations with the US (but that does not necessarily mean that they are anti-China). The national defence and public security ministries (“conservatives”) meanwhile are more concerned with the perceived threat from “hostile forces” that they deem are supported by Western powers. However, it is important not to overstate the role of factionalism in Vietnam’s foreign relations today, as reliable evidence is lacking, as argued by Khang Vu.²⁹ The distinction between the “integrationists” and “conservatives” could also be a function of the division of labour within the party’s collective leadership system. This division of labour could be useful in a situation of tensions with China because different channels of strategic communication are available to allow for flexibility and room for manoeuvring. As noted by Carlyle Thayer, “No one in Vietnam’s leadership is necessarily “pro-China.” Their differences are more about “how to manage bilateral relations, how to stand up to China when Beijing’s behaviour affects Vietnamese interests, and how close to lean towards other major powers without arousing China’s ire or undermining Vietnam’s independence and autonomy”.³⁰

ban-doi-ngoai-trung-uong-le-hoai-trung-tiep-ngoai-truong-hoa-ky-antony-bliken-134356.html; “Trưởng Ban Đối ngoại Trung ương Lê Hoài Trung thăm và làm việc tại Hoa Kỳ” [Chairman of the Central Commission for External Relations Le Hoai Trung pays a working visit to the US], 2 July 2023, <https://bdtw.org.vn/truong-ban-doi-ngoai-trung-uong-le-hoai-trung-tham-va-lam-vec-tai-hoa-ky-141547.html>

²⁹ Khang Vu, “The Analytical Obsession with ‘Factions’ in Vietnamese Politics”, *The Diplomat*, 10 March 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/the-analytical-obsession-with-factions-in-vietnamese-politics/>

³⁰ Carlyle Thayer, “Domestic and Foreign Policy in Vietnam, The Future of Vietnamese Civil Society: An Interview with Carlyle Thayer”, *Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs* 5 (2019), p. 120.

The Impact of Public Opinion

While foreign policy-making is largely the exclusive domain of the party-state, public opinion also plays a role in shaping Vietnam's foreign policy decisions, especially on contentious issues. In this regard, the favourable sentiments towards the US versus the entrenched distrust towards China among the Vietnamese people³¹ present a predicament for the CPV in how to mobilize and manage public opinion so as to boost its legitimacy while suppressing any potential challenge to its political power.

Anti-China nationalism runs deep in Vietnam, and the authorities feel the need to manage and even restrain such nationalist fervour to maintain social and political order. At the same time, any action that could be seen as appeasing China would likely face public backlash and undermine the regime's legitimacy.³² When China deployed its oil rig in Vietnam's EEZ in 2014, hundreds of anti-China protests took place across the country, some of which turned into riots, and calls for Vietnam to "exit the Chinese orbit" ("*thoát Trung*") were widespread among both the public and retired senior officials. Some demonstrations also took place in 2018 to protest against a draft law on new special economic zones (SEZ) for fear of Chinese capture of Vietnamese land, especially in strategic locations such as Quang Ninh Province (bordering China), Khanh Hoa Province (home to Cam Ranh base) and Phu Quoc Island (facing Cambodian province Kampot). Unlike the 2014 episode, Vietnamese authorities reportedly sought to prevent the demonstrations, and even detained some protesters.³³ What was at stake here was not

³¹ See Hoang Thi Ha, "America's Soft Power in Vietnam: From Statecraft to Street Rap", *Fulcrum*, 23 February 2021, <https://fulcrum.sg/americas-soft-power-in-vietnam-from-statecraft-to-street-rap/>; and Hoang Thi Ha, "A Tale of Two Vaccines in Vietnam", *Fulcrum*, 12 July 2021, <https://fulcrum.sg/a-tale-of-two-vaccines-in-vietnam/>

³² Dien Nguyen An Luong, "How Hanoi Is Leveraging Anti-China Sentiments Online", *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2020/115, 13 October 2020, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_115.pdf

³³ "Vietnam Police Halt Protests Against New Economic Zones", *Reuters*, 10 June 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-protests-idUSKCN1J605X>

only Vietnam-China bilateral ties but also the potential conflation of anti-China sentiments with criticism of the government's China policy and, more seriously, opposition to the CPV's rule by drawing parallels between the CPV and the CPC.

Similarly, it is important for the Vietnamese party-state to ensure that the public's favourable sentiments towards the US are not employed or pitched towards advocating for democratization and challenging the CPV's political authority. The CPV Central Department of Propagation and Education holds a central position in shaping domestic media discourse, overseeing, instructing, and censoring the coverage of international affairs by news outlets, particularly on sensitive topics concerning Vietnam. Media coverage of visits by US leaders to the country is meticulously controlled, deliberately avoiding any mention of human rights issues or activities related to human rights, such as Antony Blinken's acknowledgement of human rights concerns and his visit to a Catholic convent during his 2023 visit to Hanoi.³⁴ Notably, while the US is viewed favourably by many Vietnamese, anti-America sentiments still exist in some segments of society, driven by historical experiences from the Vietnam War, entrenched anti-imperialist and anti-Western propaganda disseminated by elements within the security apparatus, and concerns regarding the US' perceived "peaceful revolution" agenda. As argued by Dien Nguyen, anti-American narratives are allowed to circulate on Vietnamese social media, representing the conservative elements within the Vietnamese party-state and the broader society.³⁵

Domestic Goals of Vietnam's Foreign Policy

According to official party documents, Vietnam's foreign policy is aimed "to secure a peaceful and stable environment that is conducive to

³⁴ Dien Nguyen An Luong and Hoang Thi Ha, "Is the Sun Shining on Vietnam-US Relations?", *Fulcrum*, 20 April 2023, <https://fulcrum.sg/is-the-sun-shining-on-vietnam-us-relations/>

³⁵ Dien Nguyen An Luong, "U.S. Will Have to Work Hard to Win Over Vietnam's Conservatives".

industrialization and modernization; defend independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity; and elevate the country's international standing and actively contribute to the cause for peace, national independence, democracy and social progress in the world."³⁶ Dang Cam Tu and Nguyen Vu Tung summarize this in three domestic goals, namely (i) to uphold national security, (ii) to mobilize international resources for economic development, and (iii) to elevate Vietnam's international standing.³⁷ Similarly, Vu Khoan, former deputy prime minister and an influential figure in advocating Vietnam's international integration after the Cold War, encapsulated the country's foreign policy in the three strategic objectives of "security, development and influence".³⁸ Using the legitimation approach, Phan Xuan Dung and Benjamin Tze Ern Ho view Vietnam's foreign policy as part of the CPV's three-pronged legitimation strategy: (i) performance-based legitimation, (ii) nationalism-based legitimation vis-à-vis China, and (iii) defensive legitimation vis-à-vis "hostile forces". They argue that the pursuit of these different facets of legitimation would "produce the push and pull forces that ensure Vietnam does not veer too far away from China nor lean too close toward the US".³⁹

³⁶ The English website of the Government of Vietnam, "Đường lối đối ngoại Đại hội XI và những phát triển quan trọng trong tư duy đối ngoại của Đảng ta" [The foreign policy guidelines at the 11th Party Congress and important developments in our Party's foreign policy thinking], 11 October 2011, <https://baochinhphu.vn/duong-loi-doi-ngoai-dai-hoi-xi-va-nhung-phat-trien-quan-trong-trong-tu-duy-doi-ngoai-cua-dang-ta-102105424.htm>

³⁷ Dang Cam Tu and Nguyen Vu Tung, "Decoding Vietnam's Foreign Policy After the Thirteenth National Party Congress: Process, Continuity, and Adjustment", *TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* (2022), pp. 1–13, <https://doi.org.10.1017/trn.2022.9>

³⁸ Vu Khoan, "An ninh, phát triển, ảnh hưởng trong hoạt động đối ngoại" [The Objectives of Security, Development and Influence in Foreign Policy].

³⁹ Phan Xuan Dung and Benjamin Tze Ern Ho, "How Regime Legitimation Influences Vietnam's Strategy Toward US–China Strategic Rivalry", *International Journal of Asian Studies* (2022): 1–20, <https://doi.org.10.1017/S1479591422000286>

The recognition of these domestic goals of foreign policy led to the most important shift in Vietnam's approach to foreign relations from the binary friend-and-foe dichotomy to a more dialectic combination of "cooperation" and "struggle". First introduced in the CPV's Strategy to Defend the Fatherland in the New Situation in 2003 and reiterated in the Political Report of the CPV's 13th Congress in 2021,⁴⁰ the combination of "cooperation" and "struggle" provides the guiding paradigm for Vietnam's relations with China and the US.

According to Dang and Nguyen, such a paradigm "implies the primacy of pragmatic considerations of national interests over ideological ones in the formulation and implementation of Vietnam's foreign policy".⁴¹ This should be qualified by the fact that "national interests" and "ideological values" are not always neatly distinguishable. Ideology is in itself an indispensable part of the national interests as defined by the CPV because it provides the doctrinal basis for the party's monopoly of political authority under the banner of "socialism building". It is defensive in nature for the purpose of regime preservation, not for the cause of class struggle and socialist internationalism, as it was during the Cold War.

The salience of ideology in Vietnam's foreign policy today is subject to how acutely the Vietnamese party-state perceives the threats presented to its regime security from so-called "hostile forces" within and outside the country. According to Vietnam's 2004 National Security Law, national security includes both "regime security" ("the stability and durability of the socialist regime and of the state") and "national sovereignty" ("the inviolable independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the motherland"). The two objectives are intertwined, with the ability to defend territorial integrity being essential for regime survival and vice

⁴⁰ Báo cáo chính trị của Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng khoá XII tại Đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc lần thứ XIII của Đảng [Political report of the 12th Central Standing Committee at the 13th Party Congress], *dangcongsan.vn*, 23 March 2021, <https://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/ban-chap-hanh-trung-uong-dang/dai-hoi-dang/lan-thu-xiii/bao-cao-chinh-tri-cua-ban-chap-hanh-trung-uong-dang-khoa-xii-tai-dai-hoi-dai-bieu-toan-quooc-lan-thu-xiii-cua-3734>

⁴¹ Dang Cam Tu and Nguyen Vu Tung, "Decoding Vietnam's Foreign Policy".

versa. Yet, tensions could also arise between the two, as described earlier on the question facing the Vietnamese authorities in dealing with anti-China protests over the South China Sea dispute or other China-related matters. China is an “object of struggle” on the question of national sovereignty and a critical partner for regime security. On the other hand, the US is more an “object of struggle” in terms of regime security than a cooperation partner for Vietnam on the issue of national sovereignty in the South China Sea.

VIETNAM’S BALANCING ACT: NAVIGATING “PARTNERSHIP AND STRUGGLE” WITH CHINA AND THE US

The CPV defines “partners” and “objects of struggle” as follows: “Those that respect independence, sovereignty, establishment and advancement of friendly relations and equal and mutually beneficial cooperation with Vietnam are our partners. Those that conspire or take action to sabotage our country’s objectives of national building and defence are objects of struggle”.⁴² As such, both China and the US are simultaneously “partners” and “objects of struggle”. This section examines how “cooperation” and “struggle” concomitantly unfold in Vietnam’s contemporary relations with China and the US, which are issue-based and evolving over time.

Vietnam and China: A Well-Behaved and/or Recalcitrant Comrade?

Due to its proximity, sheer weight and size, and political influence over the CPV, China is “the unavoidable partner” that maintains “the

⁴² Pham Quang Minh and Nguyen Hong Hai, “Vấn đề “đồng tác” và “đối tượng” trong Văn kiện Đại hội XIII của Đảng: Từ nhận thức đến thực tế” [On the issue of “partners” and “objects of struggle” in the Documents of the 13th Party Congress: from conception to reality], *Tap Chi Cong San*, 24 June 2021, https://www.tapchiconsan.org.vn/web/guest/media-story/-/asset_publisher/V8hhp4dK31Gf/content/van-de-doi-tac-va-doi-tuong-trong-van-kien-dai-hoi-xiii-cua-dang-tu-nhan-thuc-den-thuc-te

preponderance of influence” in Vietnam.⁴³ China was the first major power to establish a “comprehensive strategic partnership” with Vietnam in 2008, which is considered the highest level in Vietnam’s external relations. Having a friendly, stable and mutually beneficial relationship with China is a top priority of Vietnam’s foreign policy because such a relationship is essential to maintaining a peaceful external environment for Vietnam to pursue its national development. This is the hard lesson learned by the Vietnamese leadership as they came out of the “sobering experience of ineffectual hostility” with China in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s.⁴⁴ As noted by the late CPV General Secretary Le Kha Phieu: “We live adjacent by a big country; we cannot afford to maintain tension with them because they are next door to us.”⁴⁵

As such, in line with the “flexible in tactics, firm in principle” ethos, Hanoi is willing to show deference and give “face” to Beijing on matters deemed as non-fundamental to its national interests. For example, it agreed to build a “community of shared future” with China during Xi Jinping’s visit to Vietnam in 2023, despite being cognizant that China promotes the “community of shared future” discourse to push for a more Chinese-centric vision of regional order and global governance.⁴⁶ Hanoi’s embrace of the term, however, is primarily a pragmatic decision that recognizes the breadth and depth of Vietnam-China ties, rather than

⁴³ Derek Grossman, “Regional Responses to US-China Competition in the Indo-Pacific: Vietnam”, *RAND*, 2020, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR4400/RR4412z6/RAND_RR4412z6.pdf

⁴⁴ Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (Cambridge: New York, 2006), p. 30.

⁴⁵ Cited in Alexander L. Vuving, “Strategy and Evolution of Vietnam’s China Policy: A Changing Mixture of Pathway”, *Asian Survey* 46, no. 6 (November/December 2006): 805–24.

⁴⁶ See Manoj Kewalramani, *China as a Rising Norm Entrepreneur: Examining GDI, GSI and GCI*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 2/24 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/TRS2_24.pdf

an endorsement of the Chinese vision or an ideological commitment to a preordained destiny with Beijing.⁴⁷

Another notable example of Vietnam's deference to China, at least in rhetoric, is its explicit endorsement of China's Global Security Initiative (GSI), alongside the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), during Xi Jinping's 2023 visit.⁴⁸ These initiatives represent China's efforts to reshape regional order and global governance according to its own interests and values. The GSI, in particular, has been a source of contention due to its "indivisible security" concept, which asserts that the legitimate security concerns of all countries need to be taken seriously. Beijing employs this concept to emphasize its sense of insecurity at the expense of the strategic autonomy of its neighbouring states to choose their own security arrangements with external powers. Furthermore, the GSI's preaching about respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity does not align with China's excessive claims that violate the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and its ongoing encroachments, intimidations, and harassments against the Vietnamese in the South China Sea.⁴⁹ Therefore, Vietnam's support of the GSI, despite its initial caution and its clear-eyed recognition of the disparity between China's moralistic posturing and its aggressive nationalistic actions, can be perplexing to many observers. However, from Hanoi's perspective, the primary consideration may be the significance of Xi's state visit, which occurred

⁴⁷ Hoang Thi Ha, "Beyond the Buzzword: Vietnam's Nuanced View of a 'Shared Future' with China", *Straits Times*, 15 December 2023, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/beyond-the-buzzword-vietnam-s-nuanced-view-of-a-shared-future-with-china>

⁴⁸ Joint Statement between Vietnam and China, *Vietnam.vn*, 13 December 2023, <https://www.vietnam.vn/en/tuyen-bo-chung-viet-nam-trung-quoc/>

⁴⁹ Hoang Thi Ha, "Why Is China's Global Security Initiative Cautiously Perceived in Southeast Asia?", *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2023/11, 22 February 2023, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2023-11-why-is-chinas-global-security-initiative-cautiously-perceived-in-southeast-asia-by-hoang-thi-ha/>

just months after Biden's. These high-profile visits attest to Vietnam's elevated international standing, bolstering the CPV's legitimacy and validating Nguyen Phu Trong's signature "bamboo diplomacy" strategy.

A critical aspect of Vietnam-China relations is the convergence of political interests between Vietnam and China, both domestically and globally. Domestically, the CPV looks towards China for ideas, experiences and best practices in building its socialist-oriented market economy and enhancing its regime security. As noted by Brantly Womack, "In both revolution and reform, China has served as the most important referent for Vietnamese politics."⁵⁰ Recent political developments in Vietnam, such as the party's greater control over the state, the re-election of Trong for a norm-breaking third term as the party chief, his growing dominance as a "core leader", his focus on party-building and cadre rectification, and his anti-corruption drive, which is becoming an incessant campaign of political purging,⁵¹ mirror China's politics under Xi Jinping's leadership. At the global level, both countries share grievances against the post-Cold War liberal hegemony and the West's human rights and democracy agenda. They instead advocate for the right to development and the importance of socio-economic development in realizing human rights, as well as respect for national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs. Vietnam often votes in alignment with China and rarely votes in alignment with the US on human rights-related issues at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHCR).⁵²

Yet, despite their political affinity, the Vietnamese maintain deep-seated distrust towards China. According to the annual State of Southeast

⁵⁰ Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (New York: Cambridge, 2006), p. 11.

⁵¹ Nguyen Khac Giang, "Nguyen Phu Trong's Dominance in Vietnamese politics: Far-reaching Implications", *Fulcrum*, 27 February 2023, <https://fulcrum.sg/nguyen-phu-trongs-dominance-in-vietnamese-politics-far-reaching-implications/>

⁵² Based on the data collated from the UN Watch Database at <https://unwatch.org/database/resolution-database/>. Also see Hoang Thi Ha, "Vietnam and Russia's Political Alignment: More than Meets the Eye", *Fulcrum*, 25 May 2022, <https://fulcrum.sg/vietnam-and-russias-political-alignment-more-than-meets-the-eye/>

Asia (SSEA) survey by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, which tracks the trust ratings of major powers among Southeast Asian foreign policy-security establishments, the majority of Vietnamese respondents consistently display deep distrust towards China.⁵³ This sentiment is also strongly echoed at the public level, with 80 per cent of Vietnamese respondents viewing China’s power and influence as a major threat to global peace and security, compared to 21 per cent who identify the US as a major threat, according to Pew’s 2017 Global Attitudes Survey. In fact, Vietnam is the only country in the survey that identified China as the top global threat.⁵⁴

This deep-seated distrust is rooted in historical animosities and a sense of vulnerability among the Vietnamese due to China’s proximity and overwhelming capabilities. The ongoing territorial and maritime dispute in the South China Sea only serves to exacerbate these concerns. It is also a constant reminder that China presents the greatest threat to Vietnam’s territorial integrity and sovereignty.

To address this threat, Hanoi has adopted a multi-pronged strategy involving both hard and soft balancing. Its military modernization in the past two decades focused primarily on acquiring naval and air assets to improve its maritime domain awareness, anti-access/area denial and asymmetrical warfare capabilities. This includes procuring two DPRK-made Yugo-class submarines, six Russia-made Kilo-class diesel-electric submarines, twelve corvettes and eighty-four combat-capable aircraft, as well as donated patrol boats from the US, Japan and India.⁵⁵ Vietnam has also intensified its maritime security partnerships with India, South

⁵³ *State of Southeast Asia Survey*, various issues 2019–2024 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute), <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/category/articles-commentaries/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/>

⁵⁴ Gregory B. Poling and Andreyka Natalegawa, “Assessing U.S. and Chinese Influence in Southeast Asia”.

⁵⁵ See Ridipt Singh, “Vietnam’s Purchase of Kilo-class Submarines and Military Modernization”, *CESCUBE*, 12 May 2023, <https://www.cescube.com/vp-vietnam-s-purchase-of-kilo-class-submarines-and-military-modernization>; Robert Czulda, “Naval Modernization in Southeast Asia”, *European Security & Defence*, 30 November 2022, <https://euro-sd.com/2022/11/articles/28427/naval-modernisation-in-southeast-asia/>

Korea, Japan and the US, focusing on arms sales, defence-industrial cooperation and vessel donations. In addition to hard balancing, Hanoi has also relied on international law and diplomatic channels as essential components of its strategy. It has actively utilized ASEAN and UN platforms to garner international support for preserving the maritime rules-based order anchored in UNCLOS and rejecting China's historical claims within the Nine-Dash Line. For example, as the chair of ASEAN in 2020, Hanoi consistently underscored the paramount significance of UNCLOS as "the basis for determining maritime entitlements, sovereign rights, jurisdiction and legitimate interests over maritime zones", and as "the legal framework within which all activities in the oceans and seas must be carried out" in the outcome documents of high-level ASEAN meetings.⁵⁶ Vietnam has not gone as far as the Philippines in bringing the South China Sea disputes to international arbitration, but it has not ruled out that pathway, keeping it as a potential leverage.

The South China Sea dispute is the most contentious issue in Vietnam-China relations. It is often used as a lens to evaluate the relationship, leading many analysts to conclude that Vietnam possesses the fortitude to assert its interests in the face of Chinese power. However, it is important to consider Hanoi's careful and cautious approach in order to avoid provoking Beijing's coercive actions. This may entail a degree of accommodation and even acquiescence to Chinese demands to keep the overall relationship on a stable footing. For example, Vietnam has cancelled some oil and gas contracts around Vanguard Bank, which lies within its own EEZ, mainly due to China's pressure.⁵⁷ In recent years, Hanoi has also refrained from frequently publicizing instances of Chinese harassment at sea, a notable shift from its more vigorous

⁵⁶ Hoang Thi Ha, "ASEAN and the South China Sea Code of Conduct: Raising the Aegis of International Law", *Fulcrum*, 20 September 2020, <https://fulcrum.sg/asean-and-the-south-china-sea-code-of-conduct-raising-the-aegis-of-international-law/>

⁵⁷ Le Hong Hiep, "Vietnam: Managing Chinese Pressures around Vanguard Bank", *Fulcrum*, 23 July 2020, <https://fulcrum.sg/vietnam-managing-chinese-pressures-around-vanguard-bank/>

condemnation of China during the 2014 oil rig incident. This low-profile response also serves to avoid inciting public anti-China sentiments that could further strain bilateral ties and might otherwise force the CPV into a more confrontational stance against China.

Apart from the South China Sea, the Mekong River is emerging as another area of national security concern for Vietnam. China's hydropower dams in the upper Mekong and its dam-building investments in Laos have contributed to dramatic hydrological changes and reduced sediments in the Mekong Delta. This has had a negative impact on Vietnam's food security and economic well-being as the Mekong Delta produces over half of the country's rice exports and 70 per cent of its fish and fruit exports.⁵⁸ According to a study, Vietnam's GDP could shrink by 0.3 per cent because of impacts associated with upstream hydropower dams.⁵⁹ Furthermore, as China's influence in the Mekong subregion becomes predominant, Laos and Cambodia, which traditionally fall under Vietnam's sphere of influence, are increasingly pivoting towards the Chinese orbit.⁶⁰ Phnom Penh and Vientiane's position on the South China Sea dispute within ASEAN is inimical to Vietnam's interests. Both countries have not enthusiastically supported Vietnam's efforts to bring the Mekong issues onto the ASEAN agenda either. Of note, the China-funded Funan Techo canal project in Cambodia—a 180-km waterway harnessing water from the Mekong River to enable Cambodia's direct access to the sea, bypassing traditional transit through Vietnam—is raising concerns in Hanoi about environmental impacts on its Mekong

⁵⁸ Minh Vu, "Joint Forces Boost Sustainable Transformation in Mekong Delta", *Hanoi Times*, 7 September 2022, <https://hanoitimes.vn/joint-forces-boost-sustainable-transformation-in-mekong-delta-321708.html>

⁵⁹ Phan Anh, "Mekong River Dams Could Slice 0.3 pct off Vietnam's GDP: Report", *VnExpress*, 30 March 2020, <https://e.VnExpress.net/news/news/mekong-river-dams-could-slice-0-3-pct-off-vietnam-s-gdp-report-4075308.html>

⁶⁰ Phan Xuan Dung, "Vietnam's Response to China's Growing Dominance in the Mekong: A Quest for Harmonious Coexistence", in *The Displaced: Disrupted Trade, Labour, and Politics in the Mekong River Basin*, edited by Brahma Chellaney and Frederick Kliem (Tokyo: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Japan, 2021).

Delta as well as the potential loss of significant leverage over Phnom Penh.⁶¹

On the economic front, the track record of Vietnam-China ties has been mixed. Bilateral trade has increased exponentially in the past decade. Vietnam is China's sixth biggest trading partner and among all ten ASEAN countries, China trades the most with Vietnam. China is also Vietnam's largest trading partner, second-largest export market and largest source of foreign visitors. In 2022, bilateral trade reached over US\$175 billion with China running a US\$60 billion surplus.⁶² Vietnam's trade deficit with China is often framed as a disadvantage and a source of grievance for Hanoi.⁶³ But without China as the largest supplier of intermediary inputs, Vietnam's manufacturing and export capabilities could not have reached their current levels. This imbalance is largely due to China's dominant position in the regional production networks. It may gradually be addressed if Vietnam can expand and upgrade its participation in the global value chains, especially with the ongoing relocation and diversification of these chains from China, and

⁶¹ "Why a Chinese-Backed Canal Project in Cambodia is Making Vietnam Very Nervous", *China and the Global South podcast*, 2 April 2024, <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/podcasts/why-a-chinese-backed-canal-project-in-cambodia-is-making-vietnam-very-nervous/>; Jack Brook, "Cambodia to Divert Mekong trade Via China-Built Canal, Vexing Vietnam", *Nikkei Asia*, 12 March 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/Cambodia-to-divert-Mekong-trade-via-China-built-canal-vexing-Vietnam>

⁶² Duc Duy, "Thương mại hai chiều Việt Nam-Trung Quốc vượt 11 tỷ USD tháng đầu năm" [Vietnam-China two-way trade exceeds US\$11 billion in the first month of the year], *Vietnamplus*, 15 February 2023, <https://www.vietnamplus.vn/thuong-mai-hai-chieu-viet-nam-trung-quoc-vuot-11-ty-usd-thang-dau-nam/846057.vnp>

⁶³ Ha Duy, "Nỗi lo nhập siêu từ Trung Quốc: Giải thích của Bộ Công Thương" [Concerns over import surplus from China: Explanations from the Ministry of Industry and Trade], *nhadautu.vn*, 20 November 2020, <https://nhadautu.vn/loi-lo-nhap-sieu-tu-trung-quoc-giai-thich-cua-bo-cong-thuong-d45297.html>; "Bất an với nhập siêu từ Trung Quốc" [Anxieties over import surplus from China], *vnbusiness.com*, 27 January 2022, <https://vnbusiness.vn/viet-nam/bat-an-voi-nhap-sieu-tu-trung-quoc-1083456.html>

if China further opens its market to Vietnamese agricultural products. During Trong's visit to China in 2022, China pledged to expedite access to its market for Vietnam's agricultural and fishery products and ensure the smooth trade flow at border crossings which are critical for a substantial portion of Vietnamese agricultural exports. This increased interdependence with China, however, also renders Vietnam more susceptible to Chinese coercion, as evidenced by China's temporary halt in lobster imports at the border when Vietnam elevated its relationship with the US to a CSP in September 2023.⁶⁴

Acutely aware of its vulnerabilities vis-à-vis China, Vietnam has extensively diversified its economic ties with all other powers. China lags far behind other players, such as South Korea, Japan, the European Union, Singapore and Taiwan, in terms of foreign investment, infrastructure financing and development assistance to Vietnam. While China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has seen success in mainland Southeast Asia, it has not made significant progress in Vietnam. Many of Hanoi's economic choices are guided by national security concerns, especially to prevent Chinese access to and control of critical infrastructure and strategically vital areas. This includes the exclusion of Huawei from its 5G network roll-out, preferring Japan's support in building the national high-speed railway, restricting bidding in a major highway project to domestic firms only to preclude Chinese firms' participation, and postponing a draft law that would set up three new special economic zones with a ninety-nine-year lease offer to foreign investors, one of which is located in a province bordering China.⁶⁵ Chinese-funded infrastructure projects in Vietnam

⁶⁴ Le Tan, "Six Tons of Lobster Die at Vietnam-China Border", *VnExpress.net*, 22 September 2023, <https://e.VnExpress.net/news/business/industries/six-tons-of-lobster-die-at-vietnam-china-border-4656304.html>

⁶⁵ See Tomoya Onishi, "Vietnam Carrier Develops Native 5G Tech to Lock out Huawei", *Nikkei Asia*, 25 January 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Telecommunication/Vietnam-carrier-develops-native-5G-tech-to-lock-out-Huawei>; "Vietnam Requests Aid from Japan for Mega Railway, Refinery Projects", *Nikkei Asia*, 14 January 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Vietnam-requests-aid-from-Japan-for-mega-railway>

mainly centred around legacy power plants, mostly coal and thermal, railways to facilitate cross-border trade, and a metro line in Hanoi.⁶⁶

As Vietnam's neighbour, political ally, economic partner and security rival, China continues to cast a long shadow over Vietnam's security and development. A constructive and friendly relationship with China is crucial for a favourable external environment for the country. At the same time, Hanoi will be cautious to avoid economic and strategic dependency on China. It has made strenuous efforts to diversify and deepen its ties with all other powers, not only the US but also Japan, South Korea, European and ASEAN countries, India and Russia, to balance against Chinese influence. Of note, while agreeing to build a "community of shared future" with China, Hanoi has also embraced the Indo-Pacific construct, which underscores the principles of respect of independence, national sovereignty, and adherence to international law. During Vietnamese President Vo Van Thuong's visit to Japan in late November 2023, just two weeks before Xi's visit to Hanoi, both countries elevated their ties to a CSP and stressed "the importance of the free and open international order based on the rule of law ... in the Indo-Pacific region". As such, Vietnam will continue to navigate between being a cooperative and a defiant comrade to China, as it has always done throughout history.

Vietnam and the US: More "Cooperate" Than "Struggle", for Now

Given their traumatic past, the rapid progress of Vietnam-US relations to date has been impressive. Since the normalization of bilateral ties in

refinery-projects; "Vietnam Closes Bidding on Highway Project, Refusing Investments From China", *Radio Free Asia*, 25 September 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/bidding-09252019163751.html>; Bennett Murray, "Vietnamese See Special Economic Zones as Assault from China", *SCMP*, 7 June 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2149785/vietnamese-see-special-economic-zones-assault-china>

⁶⁶ Lowy Institute Southeast Asia Aid Map, <https://seamap.lowyinstitute.org/> (accessed 9 October 2023).

1995, every sitting US president has visited Vietnam. During the latest visit by President Biden, the two countries elevated their relationship to a CSP, putting the US on par with China and Russia in the highest order of Vietnam's external relations. This development was lauded by Vietnamese leaders as an "unprecedented quantum leap", whereas Biden emphasized that it ushered in a new age where "hope and history rhyme" for both nations.⁶⁷

Geopolitics has played a big part in bringing Washington and Hanoi closer together. Vietnam is viewed as a "frontline state" in Washington's strategic competition with Beijing.⁶⁸ Defence Secretary James Mattis of the Trump administration said the two countries are "like-minded partners" on such principles as "freedom of navigation, respect for international law, and recognition of national sovereignty" (this is the coded language aiming at China's assertive and coercive behaviours in the South China Sea).⁶⁹ Kurt Campbell, Deputy Secretary of State of the Biden administration, described Vietnam as a "critical swing state" in the Indo-Pacific and urged both countries' leaders to be more forthcoming in "sharing true strategic purpose".⁷⁰ This "true strategic purpose" is grounded in the US Indo-Pacific strategy that seeks to robustly compete, confront and even contain China, especially in the maritime domain.

⁶⁷ The White House, "Remarks by President Biden and President Võ Văn Thưởng of Vietnam at a State Luncheon", 11 September 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/09/11/remarks-by-president-biden-and-president-vo-van-thuong-of-vietnam-at-a-state-luncheon/>

⁶⁸ Khang Vu, "Why Vietnam Holds the Trump Card in the US-Vietnam Partnership", *The Diplomat*, 5 April 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/why-vietnam-holds-the-trump-card-in-the-u-s-vietnam-partnership/>

⁶⁹ US Department of Defence, Lisa Ferdinando, "Mattis Calls U.S., Vietnam 'Like-Minded Partners'", *DOD News*, 25 January 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1424401/mattis-calls-us-vietnam-like-minded-partners/>

⁷⁰ Ken Moriyasu, "India and Vietnam Will Define the Future of Asia: Kurt Campbell", *Nikkei Asia*, 20 November 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indo-Pacific/India-and-Vietnam-will-define-the-future-of-Asia-Kurt-Campbell>

Concerns about China’s threat to Vietnam’s territorial and maritime interests in the South China Sea have driven Hanoi to adopt a more forward-leaning approach in supporting US military presence in the region as an offshore balancer. Vietnam’s position, which “respects freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea of all nations, in accordance with international law, including UNCLOS”, tacitly welcomes American military presence and security engagement in the region to counterbalance China’s maritime ambitions.⁷¹ The mutual strategic concerns over China also underline Vietnam-US burgeoning maritime cooperation, with the US’s transfer of coast guard cutters, patrol boats, and law enforcement training for Vietnam, and regular port calls of American warships to the country.

Opinion polls lend credence to bullish views about Vietnam’s positive strategic outlook towards the US. According to the 2024 SSEA survey, Vietnamese respondents put the US above China as the country having the most strategic relevance to ASEAN (only Myanmar and Philippine respondents held the same view, while the rest of the ASEAN countries chose China).⁷² The Vietnamese also exhibit a more receptive attitude towards minilateral arrangements such as the Quad and AUKUS. In the 2020 SSEA survey, around 65 per cent of Vietnamese respondents thought that the Quad would have positive or very positive impact on Southeast Asian security, and agreed that their country should participate

⁷¹ See Dieu An, “Quan điểm của Việt Nam về việc Mỹ đưa tàu khu trục tuần tra ở Hoàng Sa” [Vietnam’s view on the USS McCampbell’s passage through the Paracels waters], *Tuoi Tre*, 9 January 2019, <https://tuoitre.vn/quan-diem-cua-viet-nam-ve-viec-my-dua-tau-khu-truc-tuan-tra-o-hoang-sa-20190109164037139.htm>; T. Bao Anh, “Mỹ điều 2 tàu khu trục đến gần quần đảo Trường Sa” [US deploys two guided-missile destroyers near the Spratlys], *Tuoi Tre*, 11 February 2019, <https://tuoitre.vn/my-dieu-2-tau-khu-truc-den-gan-quan-dao-truong-sa-20190211134817656.htm>

⁷² Sharon Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024), <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/The-State-of-SEA-2024.pdf>

in military exercises organized under the Quad framework.⁷³ In the 2023 edition, 64 per cent of Vietnamese respondents agreed that strengthening the Quad would have a positive and reassuring effect on Southeast Asia.⁷⁴ This positive perception remained strong in the 2024 survey, with 52.5 per cent of Vietnamese respondents believing that ASEAN-Quad cooperation would be beneficial for the region, and 35.5 per cent considering it complementary to ASEAN's efforts.⁷⁵

Nonetheless, Washington should not attribute excessive significance to these perceptions and preferences, as they do not equate to official policy. Nor should the US overstate its strategic like-mindedness with Vietnam since there are structural constraints that compel Hanoi to maintain a safe distance from any perceived efforts to outrightly contain or confront China. As mentioned earlier, a friendly and stable relationship with China is indispensable to a favourable external environment for Vietnam; deference to China is both an embedded mindset and a rational calculation in Vietnamese strategic thinking.⁷⁶ As such, Hanoi has been very cautious in ensuring that its burgeoning ties with the US do not insinuate estrangement from China.⁷⁷ In fact, Hanoi had been hesitant

⁷³ Tang Siew Mun et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2020 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/TheStateofSEASurveyReport_2020.pdf

⁷⁴ Sharon Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2023 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023), <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/The-State-of-SEA-2023-Final-Digital-V4-09-Feb-2023.pdf>

⁷⁵ Sharon Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report*.

⁷⁶ Hoang Thi Ha, “Armed Conflicts Over East Asian Flashpoints: Impossible Choices for Vietnam”, in *Deterring Conflict and Preserving Peace in Asia*, edited by Drew Thompson and Byron Chong (Singapore: Centre on Asia and Globalisation, December 2022), https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/cag/deterring-conflict-and-preserving-peace-in-asia_dec2022.pdf

⁷⁷ See Nguyen Hung Son, “The US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Is Not All About China”, *The Diplomat*, 14 September 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/the-u-s-vietnam-comprehensive-strategic-partnership-is-not-all-about-china/>

to upgrade its ties with Washington to a strategic partnership for over a decade, partly because of its sensitivity towards Beijing.⁷⁸ In the lead-up to President Biden's visit to Vietnam in September 2023, Hanoi undertook efforts to mitigate any potential fallout from Beijing. These efforts included a visit by Trong to the Friendship Pass in the border area between Vietnam and China, where he met the head of the CPC international department.⁷⁹

Instead of engaging in geopolitical posturing, Vietnam's preference would be to direct its security relations with the US towards fulfilling its concrete needs spanning both traditional and non-traditional aspects. Important developments in this regard include the lifting of US ban on lethal weapon sales to Vietnam in 2016, US capacity-building support for Vietnam's maritime domain awareness, including the transfer of coast guard cutters and a training centre for fisheries resources surveillance, the establishment of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) regional office in Hanoi, US donation of millions of much needed Covid-19 vaccine doses in 2021, and US ongoing efforts to support water security, environmental protection and climate change resilience in the

⁷⁸ Le Hong Hiep, "Why Did Vietnam Cancel Its Defence Engagements with the US?", *ISEAS Commentary*, no. 2018/103, 11 December 2018, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/commentaries/why-did-vietnam-cancel-its-defence-engagements-with-the-us-by-le-hong-hiep/>; Nguyen The Phuong, "Vietnam's Need to Become a Proactive Middle Power", *AMTI*, 30 October 2019, <https://amti.csis.org/vietnams-need-to-become-a-proactive-middle-power/>; Phan Xuan Dung, "Vietnam's Relations with the US: Time for an Upgrade", *Fulcrum*, 13 January 2023, <https://fulcrum.sg/vietnams-relations-with-the-united-states-time-for-an-upgrade/>; Jonathan Stromseth, "A Window of Opportunity to Upgrade US-Vietnam Relations", *Brookings*, 20 December 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/12/20/a-window-of-opportunity-to-upgrade-us-vietnam-relations/>

⁷⁹ Khang Vu, "Overcoming Differences, Looking to the Future: The Next Step for the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership", *The Diplomat*, 11 September 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/overcoming-differences-looking-to-the-future-the-next-step-for-the-us-vietnam-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>

Mekong Delta region.⁸⁰ This pragmatic approach is critical to building trust and adding ballast for bilateral ties going forward.

The Vietnamese leadership has also made addressing the Vietnam War legacies a top priority in their agenda with the US. This has been a long-standing process that involves multiple stakeholders from both sides, including non-governmental organizations and veteran associations.⁸¹ These efforts have focused on issues such as removing unexploded ordnance, mitigating Agent Orange’s health and environment impacts, and working together to locate the remains of fallen American and Vietnamese troops.⁸² While a lot remains to be done, Vietnam-US cooperation in addressing war legacies has achieved tangible results and helped to rebuild trust not only among the two governments but also at the grassroots level. It is worth noting that the Vietnamese government has appreciated the relatively open approach of the US in confronting its

⁸⁰ “Obama Lifts US Embargo on Lethal Arms Sales to Vietnam”, *BBC*, 23 May 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36356695>; “US, Vietnam Coast Guard Cooperation Grows Tighter after Biden Visit”, *Stars and Stripes*, 22 September 2023, https://www.stripes.com/branches/coast_guard/2023-09-22/us-coast-guard-vietnam-biden-south-china-sea-11451408.html; Viet Anh, “US Opens Southeast Asia CDC Office in Hanoi”, *VnExpress*, 25 August 2021, <https://e.VnExpress.net/news/news/us-opens-southeast-asia-cdc-office-in-hanoi-4346198.html>; USAID, “Covid-19 Assistance: Vietnam”, <https://www.usaid.gov/vietnam/covid-19-assistance>; “Vietnam Launch New Project to Strengthen Coastal Resilience in Mekong Delta”, 15 March 2024, <https://www.usaid.gov/vietnam/press-releases/mar-15-2024-united-states-vietnam-launch-new-project-strengthen-coastal-resilience-mekong-delta>

⁸¹ Carlie Stowe, “U.S.-Vietnam Relations, the Legacy of War, and the Role of NGOs”, *GlobalWA*, 11 July 2022, <https://globalwa.org/2022/07/u-s-vietnam-relations-the-legacy-of-war-and-the-role-of-ngos/>

⁸² Le Dinh Tinh, “Boosting Vietnam-US Relations: The Agent Orange Issue”, *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2020/90, 24 August 2020, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_90.pdf; Chuck Searcy, “Legacies of War, Ironically, Have Brought Vietnam and the US Closer Together”, *VnExpress.net*, 14 February 2021, <https://e.VnExpress.net/news/perspectives/legacies-of-war-ironically-have-brought-vietnam-and-the-us-closer-together-4228006.html>

troubled past with its former enemy, as evidenced by, for example, visits by US ambassadors to cemeteries of Vietnamese soldiers killed during the war, or US support for Vietnam's DNA analysis of their unidentified remains.⁸³ This stands in contrast to China's inclination to sanitize conflict experience with its neighbours.⁸⁴ Vietnamese official media continues to avoid mentioning China in their recounts of the 1979 border war out of sensitivity towards Beijing, despite enduring legacies from that war, including leftover bombs and mines in bordering provinces and thousands of unrecovered remains.⁸⁵

Despite their history of conflict and the deep scars of the Vietnam War that are still felt by many Vietnamese survivors, the US enjoys prevalent soft power in Vietnam. According to a public survey by the Vietnam Institute of Americas Studies in 2020, 94.2 per cent of 1,000 Vietnamese respondents were in favour of the US, 94.7 per cent supported a close Vietnam-US relationship and 93.7 per cent agreed to upgrade it to a strategic partnership. 64.7 per cent chose the US as the top priority in Vietnam's foreign relations whereas China ranked last with only 10.9 per

⁸³ <https://tuoitrenews.vn/news/society/20230113/us-ambassador-visits-road-9-national-martyrs-cemetery-in-northcentral-vietnam/70911.html>; <https://tuoitrenews.vn/news/politics/20190827/us-ambassador-pays-historic-visit-to-cemetery-of-vietnam-soldiers-killed-in-war/51103.html>; <https://www.usaid.gov/vietnam/news/jul-17-2020-usaid-supports-vietnams-efforts-identify-human-remains-war>

⁸⁴ See the remarks by the Chinese defence minister at the Shangri-La Dialogue during recent years, often repeating the assertion that “Since the founding of the People's Republic of China more than 70 years ago, we never started a conflict, occupied an inch of foreign land, or waged a proxy war”, glossing over China's border offensive against Vietnam in 1979.

⁸⁵ Giang Huy and Hoang Phuong, “Soldiers Still Cleaning up China Border War's Aftermath in Northern Highlands”, *VnExpress*, 16 February 2024, <https://e.VnExpress.net/photo/news/soldiers-still-cleaning-up-china-border-wars-aftermath-in-northern-highlands-4712124.html>; Van Duan, “Còn hơn 2.000 liệt sĩ Vj Xuyên chưa tìm được hài cốt” [Over 2,000 Vi Xuyen martyrs' remains yet to be found], *nguoilaodong.com*, 14 July 2016, <https://nld.com.vn/thoi-su-trong-nuoc/con-hon-2000-liet-si-vi-xuyen-chua-tim-duoc-hai-cot-20160714180259756.htm>

cent.⁸⁶ A Pew Research Center survey in 2014 showed that the US was particularly popular among the young and educated Vietnamese people, with 89 per cent expressing a positive view. Vietnamese students made up the fifth-largest group of foreign students in the US in 2022, with only Japan attracting more Vietnamese students.⁸⁷ As Vietnamese society becomes more open and forward-looking, they will provide a strong reservoir of goodwill towards the US.

Beyond geopolitics, it is economic interests that serve as the primary impetus for Vietnam to cultivate close relations with the US. Access to the American market is crucial for Vietnam; the US is its largest export market, with Vietnam running a huge trade surplus of nearly US\$95 billion in 2022.⁸⁸ Under President Trump, the US withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), dealing a blow to Vietnam's hopes to increase market access to the US through this agreement. However, Trump's trade war with China, which continues under the Biden administration, has been a windfall for the Vietnamese economy due to trade and investment diversion from China. Since 2021, the US has become Vietnam's second-largest trading partner, while Vietnam has surpassed the United Kingdom as the US' seventh-largest trading partner in 2022.⁸⁹ Vietnam has joined

⁸⁶ Khảo sát Tìm hiểu thái độ của công chúng về quan hệ Việt - Mỹ [Survey on Public Attitudes about Vietnam-US Relations], Vietnam Institute of Americas Studies, 25 May 2020, <https://en.vienchaomy.vass.gov.vn/thong-bao/Khao-sat-Tim-hieu-thai-do-cua-cong-chung-ve-quan-he-Viet--My-20.0%3E>

⁸⁷ US Embassy and Consulate in Vietnam, "Vietnamese Students Now Fifth Largest Group of Foreign Students in the U.S., Key Indicator of Deepening Bilateral Ties", 18 November 2022, <https://vn.usembassy.gov/vietnamese-students-now-fifth-largest-group-of-foreign-students-in-the-u-s-key-indicator-of-deepening-bilateral-ties/>

⁸⁸ "Vietnam Posts Record 2022 Trade Surplus with US as China Deficit Rises", *Business Times*, 10 January 2023, <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/international/vietnam-posts-record-2022-trade-surplus-us-china-deficit-rises>

⁸⁹ Brendan Murray, "Vietnam Boots UK Out of Top Seven US Trading Partners", *Bloomberg*, 19 December 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2022-12-19/supply-chain-latest-vietnam-tops-uk-in-top-7-us-trade-partners>

the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), which focuses instead on digital economy, supply chain resilience, decarbonization, infrastructure and worker standards rather than a traditional free trade agreement.⁹⁰ At a strategic level, Vietnam welcomes the IPEF because it signifies the US intention to re-engage economically with the region. At a business level, there are hopes that the IPEF will drive further investments, especially from American firms, into green energy and high-end manufacturing in Vietnam.⁹¹ Despite robust trade ties, the US lags behind many other countries, including China, in investment into Vietnam, although it is the largest source of FDI in Southeast Asia.

President Biden's visit in September 2023 has opened up a new frontier for an enhanced US-Vietnam partnership in critical and emerging technologies. What is particularly noteworthy is that notwithstanding Vietnam's one-party regime and ideological alignment with China, the Biden administration recognizes the country as a "reliable" and "like-minded partner" for the "friend-shoring" of critical technology supply chains in cloud computing, semiconductors, artificial intelligence and critical minerals, among others.⁹² During the visit, the announcements of substantial chip-related investments by tech giants such as Amkor, Marvell and Synopsis, coupled with US initiatives aimed at bolstering the semiconductor ecosystem in Vietnam, have instilled hope in Hanoi for a greater role in the global technology supply chains. This economic opportunity served as a compelling impetus for Hanoi to upgrade its ties with Washington, a move more economically driven than security oriented.⁹³

⁹⁰ Kentaro Iwamoto, "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework Is Not an FTA: 5 Things to Know", *Nikkei Asia*, 19 May 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Biden-s-Asia-policy/Indo-Pacific-Economic-Framework-is-not-an-FTA-5-things-to-know>

⁹¹ Celina Pham, "The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity and What it Means for Vietnam", *Vietnam Briefing*, 17 June 2022, <https://www.vietnam-briefing.com/news/indo-pacific-economic-framework-for-prosperity-and-vietnam.html/>

⁹² Joint Statement of Biden's visit.

⁹³ Nguyen Khac Giang, "Vietnam and Washington's 'De-risking' Strategy: It's the Economy, Stupid", *Fulcrum*, 15 September 2023, <https://fulcrum.sg/vietnam-and-washingtons-de-risking-strategy-its-the-economy-stupid/>

While the US has emerged as an increasingly significant partner for Vietnam in geopolitics and economics, the difference in the two countries' political systems and the US imposition of liberal democratic values worldwide have naturally led Hanoi to view Washington as an "object of struggle" in political terms. A recurrent irritant to Hanoi in this regard is the US Department of State's reports on human rights practices and international religious freedom in Vietnam.⁹⁴ Meanwhile, the US Congress maintains its tradition of scrutinizing Vietnam's human rights record, exemplified by the introduction of the Vietnam Human Rights Act in the House of Representatives. Building political trust, therefore, has been a top priority for Vietnam in its relations with the US, with Vietnamese leaders constantly emphasizing the importance of mutual respect for "the political regime of each country" and secure assurances from Washington to "respect each other's political system".⁹⁵

The extent to which political differences act as structural barriers to the progress of Vietnam-US ties has, however, diminished significantly as both sides are now inclined to downplay these differences in pursuit of their common geopolitical and economic interests.⁹⁶ A key milestone in this regard was Trong's historic visit to the US in 2015, during which he and President Barack Obama acknowledged the existence of their differences on human rights issues. However, both leaders adopted a forward-looking tone and exhibited the determination to forge a constructive relationship based on mutual benefits and mutual respect.

⁹⁴ US Embassy & Consulate in Vietnam, <https://vn.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/official-reports/>

⁹⁵ See "President Phúc, VP Harris Vow to Further Cooperation on COVID-19 Response, Economic Ties", *Vietnamnews*, 25 August 2021, <https://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/1018958/president-phuc-vp-harris-vow-to-further-cooperation-on-covid-19-response-economic-ties.html>; Vietnam's Ministry of National Defence website, "Party Leader Nguyen Phu Trong Holds Talks with US President Obama", 7 July 2015, <https://mod.gov.vn/en/event/detail?current=true&urile=wcm:path:/mod/sa-mod-en/sa-en-news/sa-en-news-vn/7bb660c5-182c-445b-92a8-52988408f34b>

⁹⁶ See Khang Vu, "What Role Does Ideology Play in Vietnam's Foreign Policy?", *The Diplomat*, 10 May 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/what-role-does-ideology-play-in-vietnams-foreign-policy/>

This was implicitly understood by Vietnam as mutual respect for each other's political system and development path.⁹⁷

Since the Trump administration, the US has made serious efforts to transcend ideological differences with Hanoi in pursuit of strategic objectives, particularly in confronting China. This has continued under the Biden administration. As mentioned earlier, Washington's recognition of Vietnam as a "reliable partner" for its technology friend-shoring carries significance not just in geopolitical and economic but also in political terms. Despite its "democracy versus autocracy" rhetoric, the Biden administration's engagement with Vietnam and the broader Indo-Pacific region has been guided more by pragmatism than ideology.⁹⁸ Biden was the first US president to visit Vietnam at the invitation of the CPV chief and the announcement to upgrade bilateral ties to a CSP was made during his meeting with Trong, rather than with the Vietnamese president or prime minister. Notably, the Vietnam-US joint statement from Biden's visit for the first time pledged to "promote relations between the two countries' political parties and legislative bodies". From Hanoi's perspective, Washington's willingness to blur the lines between the Vietnamese state and the CPV holds paramount importance because it signifies a major achievement for the CPV in terms of both regime preservation and international legitimacy.

Hanoi has displayed a higher level of comfort and confidence in dealing with the US on human rights issues. Both countries maintain annual bilateral dialogue on human rights, which provides an avenue to air grievances without upsetting the overall relationship. The opening of the Peace Corps office in Hanoi in 2021 and the arrival of the first Peace

⁹⁷ The White House, "Remarks by President Obama and General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong of Vietnam", 7 July 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/07/remarks-president-obama-and-general-secretary-nguyen-phu-trong-vietnam>

⁹⁸ Hoang Thi Ha, "Biden's Foreign Policy to Southeast Asia: More Pragmatism than Ideology", *Fulcrum*, 17 August 2021, <https://fulcrum.sg/bidens-foreign-policy-to-southeast-asia-more-pragmatism-than-ideology/>

Corps volunteers in Vietnam in 2022 signified growing political trust between the two countries. This is a significant change from a decade ago when the CPV still saw the Peace Corps as an American instrument of “peaceful evolution” to undermine its regime.⁹⁹ Vietnamese authorities have also adeptly leveraged the country’s geopolitical value in the US Indo-Pacific strategy to advance its security and economic interests while simultaneously tightening domestic political control. This tightening especially extends to trade unions, civil society, including environmental activism and cyberspace.¹⁰⁰ So far, there have been no significant international repercussions from these crackdowns as the US prioritizes geopolitical interests. Yet, Vietnam’s dual role as a political friend of Beijing and a geopolitical partner of the West presents a contradiction that may cast a shadow on future US-Vietnam relations.

CONCLUSION

Vietnam’s foreign policy vis-à-vis China and the US is rooted in the process of reconciling and balancing competing perceptions, goals and interests within the system. This balancing act often results in its foreign policy decisions leaning towards either superpower, depending on the specific circumstances and the issue at hand, while preserving an overall equilibrium between the two. Therefore, the “pro-US” or “pro-China” binary does not accurately encapsulate the complexities of Vietnam’s

⁹⁹ Le Hong Hiep, *The Vietnam-US Security Partnership and the Rules-based International Order in the Age of Trump*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 1/2020 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/TRS1_20.pdf

¹⁰⁰ See Dien Luong, “As West Draws Closer to Vietnam, Hanoi Gets More Like Beijing”, *Nikkei Asia*, 26 March 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/As-West-draws-closer-to-Vietnam-Hanoi-gets-more-like-Beijing>; Edmund J. Malesky and Bui Hai Thiem, “Vietnam in 2023: Stoking the Embers of the Blazing Furnace”, in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2024*, edited by Daljit Singh and Hoang Thi Ha (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 2024).

positioning amid the escalating Sino-US rivalry. As aptly put by Nguyen Khac Giang, “Vietnam remains somewhere between a frontline state in the Indo-Pacific for the US and a well-behaved comrade for China.”¹⁰¹

While China and the US loom large in Vietnam’s foreign policy, viewing Vietnam from the Sino-US binary lens misses the full spectrum of its multidirectional external relations. Vietnam considers diversification, multilateralization and integration into the regional and global economy as the best strategy to serve its national interest and ensure its strategic autonomy. In fact, Vietnam stands out as one of the most comprehensively diversified countries in foreign relations within Southeast Asia. It has China as its largest trading partner, Japan as the largest provider of Official Development Assistance, and South Korea, Singapore, Japan, Taiwan and the EU as its largest foreign investors. Additionally, Vietnam sources its arms primarily from Russia, showcasing its broad-based engagement across different regions and sectors.

ASEAN is also critical to Vietnam’s diversification strategy as the organization has been playing a crucial part in building an open and inclusive regional architecture through multiple ASEAN-led mechanisms that involve all major powers. These include the ASEAN Plus One, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three (with China, Japan and South Korea), East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus). This inclusivity helps to create a “regional balance of power and influence”¹⁰² whereby no single power can establish hegemony in Southeast Asia. ASEAN’s open and inclusive strategic outlook also helps its member states resist a binary choice between Beijing and Washington.

While Vietnam currently finds itself in a “sweet spot” of geopolitics and geo-economics induced by the US-China rivalry, the country is

¹⁰¹ Nguyen Khac Giang, “The Careful Balancing Act of Vietnam’s Bamboo Diplomacy”, *East Asia Forum*, 23 December 2022, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/12/23/the-careful-balancing-act-of-vietnams-bamboo-diplomacy/>

¹⁰² Prime Minister’s Office of Singapore, PM Lee Hsien Loong at the 27th International Conference on the Future of Asia, 26 May 2022, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-at-the-27th-International-Conference-on-the-Future-of-Asia>

experiencing significant political turmoil at home. The anti-corruption campaign has shaken the upper echelons of the CPV leadership, leading to the departure of a number of seasoned diplomats and denting the domestic standing of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. It has also resulted in widespread bureaucratic inertia and raised international concerns about Vietnam's political stability, and potential disruptions to its economic reforms.

On a positive note, Vietnam has managed to maintain its international standing and effectively pursue its foreign policy objectives despite these domestic challenges. Within just a year, Vietnam elevated its ties with South Korea, the US, Japan and Australia to a CSP, and received the leaders of the world's two foremost superpowers. However, a more sombre perspective reveals valid concerns about the uncertainty surrounding party leadership succession amid worries about the health of current leader Trong.¹⁰³ Additionally, there is an emerging trend of "securitization of the Vietnamese state", with institutions such as the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and the party's disciplinary committees gaining dominance within the system.¹⁰⁴ Tasked with safeguarding the party-state regime against sabotage or take-over by "hostile forces", the MPS historically adopted a conservative stance regarding Vietnam's foreign policy. Moving forward, it bears to watch how the MPS, which traditionally stays in the shadow of Vietnam's foreign policy formulation, may assume a more prominent role. Against this backdrop, US-Vietnam relations may land in some rough waters. However, it does not have to be

¹⁰³ Nguyen Khac Giang, "“Feigning Death to Catch Crows”? Vietnam's Succession Conundrum", *Fulcrum*, 24 January 2024, <https://fulcrum.sg/feigning-death-to-catch-crows-vietnams-succession-conundrum/>; Le Hong Hiep, "Two Presidents Ousted in One Year: What Lies Ahead for Vietnam's Political Outlook?", *Fulcrum*, 20 March 2024, <https://fulcrum.sg/two-presidents-ousted-in-one-year-what-lies-ahead-for-vietnams-political-outlook/>

¹⁰⁴ Nguyen Khac Giang, "The Political Economy of Vietnam's Anti-Corruption Campaign", in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2024*, edited by Daljit Singh and Hoang Thi Ha (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 2024).

an inevitable outcome, especially considering recent efforts by the US to engage with the MPS itself.¹⁰⁵

Vietnamese leadership and media in the past year have lauded the country's foreign policy achievements and its international standing despite the geopolitical headwinds posed by the US-China competition. However, a dose of realism and vigilance against complacency are crucial, considering that the challenges confronting the country are significant. While pragmatism often guides Vietnam's foreign policy decisions, there are instances where path dependency and risk aversion may play a role, such as in its refusal to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Externally, Vietnam's strategic vulnerabilities in the face of a more assertive and powerful China in both the South China Sea and the Lower Mekong will only intensify. The potential return of a Trump 2.0 presidency promises tough times ahead in terms of trade relations with the US. Lastly, there are risks inherent in Hanoi's balancing of its ideological alignment with Beijing and geopolitical "like-mindedness" with Washington because a friend to all may risk being a suspect to many amid the deepening US-China rivalry.

¹⁰⁵ "Bộ trưởng Tô Lâm tiếp Đại sứ Hoa Kỳ tại Việt Nam Marc Knapper" [Minister To Lam receives US Ambassador to Vietnam Marc Knapper], *ttdn.vn*, 5 March 2024, <https://ttdn.vn/tin-tuc-su-kien/thoi-su-chinh-tri/bo-truong-to-lam-tiep-dai-su-hoa-ky-tai-viet-nam-marc-knapper-99622>; Central Commission for External Relations, "Bộ trưởng Bộ Công an Đại tướng Tô Lâm tiếp Trưởng Cơ quan Đại diện thương mại Hoa Kỳ" [Minister of Public Security To Lam receives USTR], 14 February 2023, <https://bdntw.org.vn/bo-truong-bo-cong-an-dai-tuong-to-lam-tiep-truong-co-quan-dai-dien-thuong-mai-hoa-ky-ustr-102622.html>; Khang Vu, "Why the US Should Cooperate More Closely With Vietnam's Public Security Ministry", *The Diplomat*, 5 April 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/why-the-us-should-cooperate-more-closely-with-vietnams-public-security-ministry/>

ISEAS

PUBLISHING

30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614

<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

ISSN 0219-3213

TRS16/24s

ISBN 978-981-5203-63-9



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