

Briefing Memo

Vietnam's Security Cooperation with the U.S.

— Present and Prospect —

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In recent years, U.S. – Vietnamese security cooperation has shown great progress. Since the normalization of diplomatic relations by both nations in 1995, progress had been only gradual in interactions between military authorities. Since 2010, however, cooperation has rapidly developed in terms of both quantity and quality. The background to this cooperation was an issue over the South China Sea which has closed both countries' strategic interests. This paper will study the background, situation, challenges and prospects of the progress of the U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation mainly from Vietnam's viewpoint.

1 The background of progress — Convergence of strategic interests

The U.S. and Vietnam normalized diplomatic relations in 1995 with the end of the Cold War and the resolution of the Cambodian issue as a turning point, though official relations between both countries had been ruptured since the end of the Vietnam War in the 1970's. Vietnam's main purposes for normalizing relations with the U.S. were economic cooperation, in particular, export expansion to the U.S. and participation in the World Trade Organization (WTO). However, simultaneous with economic cooperation, both countries commenced exchanges in regard to security issues. But the steps were only gradual due to Vietnam's careful attitude. For example, it was actually in 2000 that the U.S. Secretary of Defense paid a visit to Vietnam.

There are two reasons for Vietnam's prudent stance. First is the fear they have toward "the peaceful evolution". The leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party has been suspicious that the U.S. and the West would overturn the Vietnamese one-party dictatorship by the penetration of democracy since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Europe in the 1990's. This made the Vietnam People's Army which pledged to protect the one-party system, cautious about improving relations with the U.S. Secondly, under the principle of omnidirectional diplomacy, including military diplomacy, Vietnam was concerned about foreign relations, especially its relations with China, and its behavior was one which attempted to restrain an over-strengthening of its relations with the U.S. The above two reasons are closely related in terms of holding onto the one-party dictatorship by the Communist Party.

However, Vietnam's wariness toward America changed in response to China's activities in the South China Sea. Since around 2009, Vietnam has been increasingly concerned about incidents, one after another, of Chinese patrol boats seizing Vietnamese fishing boats as well as obstructing the activities of fishing boats operating in the vicinity of the Paracel Islands. With the South China Sea problem

re-ignited, Vietnam began expressing a positive attitude toward the U.S.-regarding security cooperation. At the 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the U.S. clearly stated its involvement in the South China Sea issue. This was reportedly due to Vietnam's diplomatic activities as ASEAN chair requesting the involvement of the U.S. in the matter. Also, both countries began regular joint-exercises in the same year.

2. Cooperative activities

Both countries signed a September 2011 memorandum of understanding (MOU) on bilateral defense cooperation. The MOU specified five important areas such as marine security, UN peacekeeping operations (PKO), humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), and cooperation between national defense universities and research institutions. The cooperation between the two countries has been conducted according to the MOU since then and its posture is divided roughly into three aspects.

The first aspect for the U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation is multiple strategic dialogue channels. The U.S.-Vietnam Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue is a regular meeting at the vice-ministerial level between the U.S. Department of State and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam and the meeting has taken place almost every year since its establishment in 2008. In the 7th meeting held in Hanoi in January 2015, both countries consulted about cooperation over the areas of maritime security, HA/DR, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, etc. In addition, an annual U.S.-Vietnam Defense Policy Dialogue at the vice-ministerial level between the U.S. Department of Defense and the Ministry of National Defense of Vietnam made its start in August 2010. In the 6th meeting held in Washington D.C. in October 2015, both countries not only agreed to the overcoming of the legacy of the war, and the maintaining of a dialogue mechanism but also discussed maritime security cooperation, UN PKO, military medicine, search and rescue and defense industries.

The second aspect is to establish regular visits to Vietnam by the U.S. Navy and joint military exercises. In August 2010, as the first aircraft carrier to visit Vietnam, *George Washington* anchored off central Danang and invited inside people involved in the government and the military. After that, the carrier also anchored off the south of Vietnam in August 2011 and October 2012 to meet with people related to the Vietnamese Military and the government. As for joint exercises, an exercise in Vietnam by the two countries' navies has been conducted regularly since 2010. Also, a humanitarian assistance activity, the "Pacific Partnership" hosted by the U.S. Military makes a visit to Vietnam as one of its activities every two years, namely, in 2010, 2012 and 2014.

The third aspect is the acceptance of the U.S. Navy into Vietnam and the enlargement of the U.S. Military's presence. The movement of the U.S. in Cam Ranh Bay, which is a strategic point of coastal defense of Vietnam, is noteworthy. After Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung declared that the country opened the port to every country's Navy and provided backup logistical support services for vessels, the U.S. became the first customer for the services. Following the contract for a dry cargo ship *Richard Byrd* in August 2011, the U.S. contracted to maintain and repair backup logistic support ships in Cam Ranh Bay almost every year.

A Vietnam visit by Leon Panetta, the Secretary of Defense, in June 2012 symbolized the development of the U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation. Secretary Panetta gave a speech on *Richard Byrd*, which had called at Cam Ranh Bay for maintenance, and declared that the realization of the politically important visit to Cam Ranh Bay of the U.S. Secretary of Defense meant the relations with Vietnam in the U.S. Asia-Pacific strategy would enter a “next phase” in the course of the U.S.-Vietnam reinforcing cooperation in HA/DR, PKO, and the South China Sea. It can be believed that uppermost in his mind, the “next phase” was more regular visits to Cam Ranh Bay by U.S. Navy.

However, in contrast to the U.S.’s active attitude, the Vietnamese showed caution. In the joint press conference with Secretary Panetta, Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh underlined that the country was interested in a visit to a Vietnamese “commercial port” by the U.S. backup logistics support ships for maintenance and repair. Vietnam was careful of excessive emphasis on cooperation with the U.S.

In June 2015, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter paid a visit to Vietnam and signed a joint vision statement with regard to U.S. – Vietnam defense cooperation with Defense Minister Thanh. Though the statement basically followed the contents of the 2011 MOU in terms of the continuity of a strategic dialogue and cooperation related to non-traditional security, etc., it suggested the enhancement of cooperation between the two countries for the South China Sea issue, referring to the expansion of cooperation for maritime security including port calls by U.S. Navy ships for maintenance and the maritime domain awareness.

3. Issues and prospects

Vietnam’s security cooperation with the U.S. has progressed mainly over maritime issues as mentioned above, but there are some important issues in order to expand further cooperation. The first is how Vietnam will strengthen its relations with the U.S. and stabilize relations with China. When security cooperation with the U.S. was launched, Defense Vice-Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh disagreed with Vietnam’s “approaches toward the U.S.” in the beginning of an interview on the Vietnamese People’s Army organ bulletin “Quan doi Nhan dan” dated August 14, 2010, emphasizing that the visit to Vietnam of U.S. Navy ships was due to a proposal by the U.S. and Vietnam merely accepted the proposal, and the exchange project had been planned before the South China Sea situation had intensified, therefore the project had nothing to do with the problem. Vice-Minister Vinh also hinted at the circumstances leading up to the explanation of the plan to the Chinese beforehand and the seeking of their understanding regarding Secretary Panetta’s Cam Ranh Bay visit.

Second is the difference between the two nations over human rights and political systems. When President Truong Tan Sang visited Washington on the second visit of the President of Vietnam since the establishment of diplomatic relations, the difference in the two nations’ views over human rights regarding the freedom of religions and expression was made apparent. For Vietnam, which has to unconditionally maintain its one-party system, strengthening its relations with the U.S. which has a different political system and ideology is fraught with difficulties and in this aspect, Vietnam has a stronger affinity with China. Wariness toward the “peaceful evolution” does not yet disappear in Vietnam.

However, against a background in which China is taking a hard line stance in the South China Sea, even the most conservative in the Communist Party are reportedly aiming at enhancing relations with the U.S. This trend seems to have become stronger in response to the oil drilling incident which occurred between China and Vietnam from May to July 2014. In September of the same year, Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh held talks with Secretary of State John Kerry and requested U.S. support and assistance toward Vietnam. Then, in October, the U.S. decided to partially lift an arms embargo against Vietnam, which had been long requested by Vietnam, and the provision of equipment relevant to maritime security to Vietnam became possible.

In July 2015, Nguyen Phu Trong, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam paid a visit to the U.S. for the first time in history. Mr. Trong reiterated remarks which, while avoiding referring to it by name, suggested criticism and check against China as well as emphasizing a cooperative relationship toward the U.S. with regard to the South China Sea issue. In a U.S.-Vietnam summit on July 7, both nations agreed that regional countries around the South China Sea had a responsibility to secure freedom of navigation in the area and should resolve the territorial disputes based on international law and never approve the use of force and the unilateral change of the status quo. In addition, Mr. Trong spoke at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), one of the most influential strategic think-tanks in Washington D.C., in which he welcomed the United States' increasing interest in the situation in the South China Sea and stressed that the U.S. and Vietnam shared similar interests over the issue. In particular, the part, “.... the non-use or threat of force, refraining from unilateral actions to change the status quo, militarization or imposition of control over the waters and airspace in the South China Sea”, was stated clearly with China foremost in mind, a rather daring statement for a General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam. And, in the summit, both nations discussed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the human rights issue, where Vietnam emphasized it would “continue a constructive and frank dialogue with the U.S.” on the human rights issue which was one of the matters pending between the two nations. Vietnam's positive and flexible attitude toward the enhancement of the relations with the U.S. was obvious.

In this sense, Vietnam's new foreign policies by new leaders are drawing attention. In January, 2016, a Communist Party Convention is scheduled to be held, in which new leaders will be elected, and human factors such as the ideology of a new Secretary General and the percentage of conservatives in the Politburo, who are suspicious of the U.S. and place importance on China, are expected to exert a great influence on Vietnam's future security cooperation toward the U.S. As for more direct issues, it is remarkable whether Vietnam will adhere to or will reconsider the principle of the “three Nos”; no alliance is concluded, no foreign military base is built in Vietnam and no third party intervention in a bilateral conflict is sought, for the purpose of a balance in relations toward the U.S. and China.

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