

# Vietnam's Security Cooperation with the United States: Historical Background, Present and Future Outlook\*

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## Abstract

This paper discusses Vietnam's security cooperation with the United States in three phases. Following the end of the Vietnam War in the 1970s, Vietnam and the United States normalized their diplomatic relations in 1995 and took their first step towards security cooperation. Initially, the cooperation was implemented highly incrementally due to deep-rooted mutual distrust. Vietnam's security cooperation with the United States made significant strides with the reemergence of the South China Sea issue. The U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation advanced rapidly, fueled by the convergence of the two countries' strategic interests in the South China Sea. The 2014 oil rig incident triggered Vietnam to promote further convergence with the United States. The first visit to the United States by the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam was materialized in July 2015. In May 2016, the United States declared the complete lifting of the arms embargo on Vietnam. Such developments created the impression of convergence between the United States and Vietnam. While Vietnam has steadily fostered security cooperation with the United States following the inauguration of the Trump administration, it will likely continue to pursue omnidirectional external relations and give further considerations to achieving a balance in external relations, especially between the Vietnam-U.S. and Vietnam-China relationships.

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## Introduction

This paper discusses Vietnam's security cooperation with the United States in three phases in light of the historical context and background. Overall, the bilateral relationship between Vietnam and the United States has transitioned from one of confrontation to cooperation. In 1995, the two countries normalized their diplomatic relations after years of severed ties following the end of the Vietnam War in the 1970s. In parallel with the normalization of relations, the two countries took their first step towards security cooperation. Initially, with deep-rooted mutual distrust remaining between the two countries, the cooperation was implemented highly incrementally (Phase I).

Vietnam's security cooperation with the United States made significant strides with the reemergence of the South China Sea issue. China resumed active forays into these waters from around 2009. This issue presented a serious security challenge for Vietnam, which, like China, claims territorial rights over the South China Sea. Meanwhile, the United States enhanced its engagement in the South China Sea in order to secure freedom of navigation in these waters.

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The U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation advanced rapidly, fueled by the convergence of the two countries' strategic interests in the South China Sea (Phase II).

Furthermore, the 2014 oil rig incident triggered Vietnam to promote further convergence with the United States. In July 2015, the first visit to the United States by the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam was materialized. In May 2016, the United States declared the complete lifting of the arms embargo on Vietnam during President Barack Obama's visit to Vietnam. Such developments created a strong impression of convergence between the United States and Vietnam (Phase III).

Based on the above understanding, this paper examines the evolution, present situation, and challenges of the U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation and analyzes its future outlook, primarily from the viewpoint of Vietnam. It will take into account the importance attached to security cooperation within the development of the overall U.S.-Vietnam relationship, as well as Vietnam's relationship with China, which is closely intertwined with the U.S.-Vietnam relationship from the perspective of Vietnam. In this paper, Sections 1 to 3 correspond to the above Phases I to III. In Section 1, this paper examines the initial stage of U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation following the normalization of their diplomatic relations. Section 2 outlines major developments in the cooperation driven by the South China Sea issue. Section 3 analyzes the further deepening of the cooperation following the 2014 oil rig incident. In Section 4, this paper concludes by examining the present situation of the Vietnam-U.S. cooperation under the Trump administration and provides an outlook of the future of U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation.

## **1. Initial Stage of Vietnam's Security Cooperation with the United States (Phase I):**

### **Highly Incremental Progress**

Formal Vietnam-U.S. ties had been severed for about 20 years since the Vietnam War ended in the mid-1970s. Diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the United States were normalized in 1995 with the end of the Cold War and the settlement of the Cambodian issue. From the perspective of Vietnam, which aimed to develop its economy by advancing the Doi Moi (renovation) policy and actively participating in the international division of labor, the primary objective of normalizing relations with the United States lied in economic cooperation. In particular, Vietnam's major objectives were to expand exports to the United States through the conclusion of a bilateral trade agreement, increase investments by U.S. companies in Vietnam, and accede to the World Trade Organization (WTO).<sup>1</sup> Security cooperation by normalizing relations with the United States, especially fostering relations between the People's Army of Vietnam and the U.S. Forces, was not high on Vietnam's priority list by any means.

The United States and Vietnam initiated security exchanges after the normalization of relations. The exchanges initially faced setbacks. Focus was placed on the issue of U.S. servicemen declared as missing in action (MIA) during the Vietnam War, and as a result, the exchanges between the two militaries made highly incremental progress. The ninth meeting of the eighth Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1997 passed a resolution which restricted Vietnam's security cooperation with the United States to three areas: military medicine;

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<sup>1</sup> Ryuichi Ushiyama, "90 Nendai kohan iko no Taigai seisaku [Foreign Policy Since the Late 1990s]," in Masaya Shiraishi ed., *Betonamu no Taigai Kankei: 21 Seiki no Chosen* [Vietnam's External Relations: Endeavors in the 21st Century] (Tokyo: Akatsukiin Shokan, 2004), pp. 40-42.

cooperation on military science and technology; and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR). Consequently, exchanges during this period were limited to attendance of personnel of the People's Army of Vietnam at conferences organized by the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), exchanges among senior military officers, and practical cooperation in such areas as search and rescue, defense medicine, and mine clearance. It took time for high-level exchanges to commence. For example, U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen made his first visit to Vietnam in 2000, and it was not until 2003 that Vietnamese Minister of National Defense Phạm Văn Trà visited the United States.<sup>2</sup>

The highly incremental advancement of the U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation was underpinned by a deep-rooted mutual distrust between the two countries. Though diplomatic relations had normalized, Vietnam still viewed the United States with caution. Meanwhile, the United States had concerns about Vietnam's cooperation with resolving the MIA issue. There were primarily two reasons for Vietnam's cautionary attitude towards the United States. The first was fear of the "peaceful evolution (điển biến hòa bình)." Peaceful evolution is a conspiracy theory (from the perspective of a socialist country), which contends that "imperialist forces" try to bring down a socialist regime "from the inside" through actions taken not during war but during peacetime, primarily by permeating "Western" democratic ideology. Especially following the collapse of the socialist bloc of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the 1990s, the Vietnamese political leadership continued to have suspicions that the "West"—the United States being at the top of the list—would overturn Vietnam's one-party Communist Party rule by "peaceful evolution." The People's Army of Vietnam, the "military of the party" whose objectives included protecting the party regime, was wary about strengthening its relationship with the U.S. Forces.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, Vietnam attached importance to achieving a balance in its external relations based on the principle of omnidirectional diplomacy and sought to prevent the "over" strengthening of its relations with the United States. Vietnam pursued broad and diverse external relations and attempted to avoid reliance on a single bilateral relationship. The Vietnam-U.S. relationship was no exception. Vietnam viewed the normalization of their diplomatic relations as only one of Vietnam's many bilateral relations and relativized the relationship. Vietnam's defense policy followed this principle as well. Vietnam's military diplomacy with the United States based on omnidirectional diplomacy was considered part of the diversification of external relations.<sup>4</sup> It can be observed from its pursuit of balance that Vietnam gave particular considerations to its relationship with China. These two reasons were closely linked to Vietnam's domestic political system of adhering to a one-party Communist Party regime.

In the 2000s, Vietnam continued to take a prudent stance towards security cooperation with the United States. Notwithstanding this, the scope of bilateral cooperation gradually expanded

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<sup>2</sup> Colonel William Jordan, Lewis M. Stern, and Walter Lohman, "U.S.-Vietnam Defense Relations: Investing in Strategic Alignment," *Backgrounders* (The Heritage Foundation), no. 2707 (July 18, 2012), pp. 3-5.

<sup>3</sup> The Defense White Paper published by Vietnam for the first time in 1998 identifies territorial sovereignty, defending the people, as well as "securing political stability of the nation as well as preventing and causing the failure of all conspiracies and activities threatening political and social stability" as "focal areas for defense capabilities." (Bộ Quốc phòng-Cộng hòa Xã hội Chủ nghĩa Việt Nam, *Việt Nam: Cùng cố Quốc phòng Bảo vệ Tổ quốc*, 1998, tr. 18).

<sup>4</sup> Lewis M. Stern, *Defense Relations between the United States and Vietnam* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2005), pp. 75-76.

following mutual visits at the defense minister level between the two countries. In 2003, the U.S. Navy made its first port visit to Vietnam. In 2005, Vietnam signed an agreement which was a prerequisite for participating in the United States' International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. Furthermore, in October 2008, the U.S.-Vietnam Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue began as a routine vice minister level meeting between their foreign ministries, and the first meeting was held in Hanoi.<sup>5</sup>

At this time, Vietnam enjoyed a relatively favorable relationship with China, which for Vietnam was closely intertwined with the Vietnam-U.S. relationship. This can be evidenced from the advancement in the national border issue. The border demarcation issue had been one of the greatest outstanding issues between Vietnam and China since the normalization of their diplomatic relations in 1991. The issue was fundamentally settled regarding land boundary delimitation and maritime delimitation related to the Gulf of Tonkin. The two countries signed a land boundary delimitation agreement in December 1999 and an agreement on maritime delimitation in the Gulf of Tonkin and fishery cooperation in December 2000. In connection with the South China Sea territorial rights dispute, China enacted the Law on the Territorial Sea in 1992, which noted sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea. China conducted acts to strengthen its forays into the Spratly Islands, and tensions rose temporarily between Vietnam and China. Vietnam enhanced its collaboration with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and joined the multilateral dialogue route, thereby preventing the issue from intensifying between the two countries.<sup>6</sup> China took steps to improve its relationship with ASEAN, with a view to creating a stable international environment for economic development, and accepted the China-ASEAN dialogue channel on the South China Sea. In 2002, the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) that mentions peaceful settlement of the issue was signed. In 2005, Vietnam, China, and the Philippines agreed to implement an oil survey in the South China Sea. It appeared as if the parties were on track towards a peaceful settlement of the issue.

In sum, Vietnam's view of the United States and China during this period is characterized by its wariness of the United States and optimism towards the Vietnam-China relationship. Vietnam was concerned less about China's rise to power than about U.S. activities, especially the United States' unilateralism following the 9.11 terrorist attacks in 2001. Vietnam had fears of the "peaceful evolution" and attached importance to maintaining favorable relations with China. For example, the political report of the 10th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam held in 2006 states the following regarding one of the foreign policies to be implemented by Vietnam.

To actively hold dialogues with other countries, international and regional organizations on human rights issues. To determinedly defeat all conspiracies and actions that seek to distort and abuse "democratic," "human rights," "ethnic," and "religious" issues in order to interfere in internal affairs and undermine the independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, political

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<sup>5</sup> Jordan, Stern, and Lohman, "U.S.-Vietnam Defense Relations," pp. 5-6.

<sup>6</sup> Carlyle Thayer, "Sino-Vietnamese Relations: The Interplay of Ideology and National Interest," *Asian Survey*, vol. 34, no. 6 (June 1994), pp. 525-527.

security and stability of Vietnam.<sup>7</sup>

The above excerpt demonstrates that the Vietnamese political leadership was extremely wary of the “peaceful evolution” (anticipated to be led by the United States). Due to such wariness, Vietnam during this period remained cautious about advancing security cooperation with the United States.

## **2. Reemergence of the South China Sea Issue and Rapid Advancement of Cooperation (Phase II)**

Vietnam's prudent stance towards security cooperation with the United States changed with the reemergence of the South China Sea issue. As stated in the previous section, disputes over the territorial rights of islands and waters in the South China Sea temporarily subsided in the first half of the 2000s. The issue resurfaced when China resumed frequent forays into the South China Sea from around 2009. Vietnamese fishing boats operating in the vicinity of the Parcel Islands were seized in succession by patrol vessels of China's maritime law enforcement agencies. More than 100 Vietnamese fishermen were detained by Chinese authorities in 2009 alone and nearly 50 fishermen were detained in the first half of 2010, aggravating the situation. In April of that year, the Chinese government was reported to have said that it considers the South China Sea as one of its “core interests,” which further heightened Vietnam's sense of wariness.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, in 2011 and 2012, Chinese patrol vessels obstructed the operations of Vietnamese survey vessels and cut their cables. Against the backdrop of Vietnam's increasing wariness due to the reemergence of the South China Sea issue, Vietnam began to proactively pursue security cooperation with the United States.

Meanwhile, the United States made its stance clear that it would engage in the South China Sea with a view to ensuring freedom of navigation, as was demonstrated in the speech delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2010. At the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) held in July 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that the United States had strategic interests in the South China Sea, reportedly as a result of the active diplomatic activities of Vietnam, the ASEAN chair at the time, lobbying for U.S. engagement on this issue.<sup>9</sup> Based on such convergence of Vietnamese and U.S. strategic interests in the South China Sea, the U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation significantly expanded its areas of cooperation in 2010. On August 8, the U.S. Navy's nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, USS George Washington, arrived off the coast of Danang in central Vietnam. There, the United States participated in exchanges with members of the Vietnamese military and government. The navies of the two countries also conducted joint search and rescue training. Two days later, Aegis destroyer USS John S. McCain made a port call in Danang. In addition, the first U.S.-Vietnam Defense Policy Dialogue at the defense vice minister level was held in Hanoi on August 17.

As such, the reemergence of the South China Sea issue marked a turning point in U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation. It must be borne in mind, however, that Vietnam maintained its

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<sup>7</sup> Báo Điện tử Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, “Nâng cao năng lực lãnh đạo và sức chiến đấu của Đảng, phát huy sức mạnh toàn dân tộc, đẩy mạnh toàn diện công cuộc đổi mới, sớm đưa nước ta ra khỏi tình trạng kém phát triển (Báo cáo chính trị của Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng khóa IX tại Đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc lần thứ X của Đảng),” <http://dangcongsan.vn/>.

<sup>8</sup> National Institute for Defense Studies, *East Asian Strategic Review 2011* (Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies, 2011), pp.156-158.

<sup>9</sup> John Ruwitch and Ambika Ahuja, “China ruffled at security forum over maritime rows,” *Reuters*, July 23, 2010.

prudent stance while expanding cooperation with the United States. Underpinning this was China's wariness towards U.S.-Vietnam convergence. In August 2010, when Vietnam-U.S. security cooperation greatly expanded, Vietnamese Vice Defence Minister Nguyễn Chí Vịnh stated in an interview with the Vietnamese People's Army Newspaper, *Quân đội Nhân dân*, that the visit to Vietnam by the U.S. naval aircraft carrier was proposed by the United States and Vietnam no more than accepted the proposal. Vice Minister Vịnh also underscored that the exchange program of the U.S. and Vietnamese navies had been planned before the South China Sea issue became a serious issue, in order to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations, and that the exchange program had no connection to this issue, denying that Vietnam was approaching the United States.<sup>10</sup> Vice Minister Vịnh visited China immediately after the U.S.-Vietnam military exchange events and met with Ma Xiaotian, Deputy Chief of General Staff of the People's Liberation Army. Based on the time of the year and the timing of the visit, it can be inferred that the objective of the visit was to explain the content and purpose of the military exchanges with the United States to China. At his press conference during his visit to China, the Vice Minister made comments intended to dispel the concerns of China, stating, "We will by no means become a U.S. ally."<sup>11</sup>

All the while maintaining this prudent stance, Vietnam deepened and expanded its cooperation with the United States. In September 2011, the two countries concluded the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Advancing Bilateral Defense Cooperation. The MOU states five areas of priority: maritime security, search and rescue, United Nations peacekeeping operations, HA/DR, and collaboration between defense universities and research institutes.<sup>12</sup> In principle, U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation began to be conducted according to the MOU since then. The security cooperation can broadly be categorized into three types. The first is multiple strategic dialogue. The U.S.-Vietnam Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue and the U.S.-Vietnam Defense Policy Dialogue have been conducted almost every year since their establishment in 2008 and 2010, respectively.

The second form of U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation is regular visits to Vietnam by the U.S. Navy and joint naval exercises. Aircraft carrier USS George Washington made its first visit to Vietnam in August 2010. In August 2011 and October 2012, the carrier once again anchored off southern Vietnam and conducted exchange events with Vietnamese government and military personnel. As regards joint exercises, an exercise in Vietnam related to non-traditional security areas by the two countries' navies (Naval Engagement Activity [NEA]) has been conducted regularly since 2010. The humanitarian assistance activity hosted by the U.S. Forces, Pacific Partnership, made its first visit to Vietnam in 2007 and has regularly visited Vietnam every two years since 2008.

The third form of cooperation is the acceptance of the U.S. Navy into Vietnam and the U.S. Forces' expanded presence. The U.S. moves in Cam Ranh Bay, a strategic point of maritime defense of Vietnam, are noteworthy. After Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng declared in October 2010 that the country opened the port to foreign navies and would provide logistic support services for

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<sup>10</sup> "Việt Nam hợp tác hải quân với mục đích tăng cường hữu nghị trên biển," *Quân đội Nhân dân*, ngày 14-8-2010.

<sup>11</sup> "Quan hệ quốc phòng Việt Nam-Trung Quốc đang phát triển tích cực," *Quân đội Nhân dân*, ngày 27-8-2010.

<sup>12</sup> Jordan, Stern, and Lohman, "U.S.-Vietnam Defense Relations," p. 8.

vessels, the United States became the first customer of the services. Beginning with the dry cargo ship USNS Richard Byrd in August 2011, the U.S. Navy has contracted Vietnam's maintenance and repair services for logistic support ships in Cam Ranh Bay almost every year.

Furthermore, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta visited Cam Ranh Bay in June 2012. Secretary Panetta delivered an address on USNS Richard Byrd in which he declared that the U.S. Navy's access to Cam Ranh Bay will shift the U.S.-Vietnam relationship to the "next level."<sup>13</sup> The "next level" signified the further deepening of U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation. In contrast with the United States' intention to proactively enhance the cooperation, Vietnam continued to take a prudent stance. For example, at a joint press conference with Secretary Panetta, Minister of National Defense Phùng Quang Thanh stated that Vietnam was interested in visits to a Vietnamese "commercial port" (as opposed to a military port) by the U.S. Forces' (non-combat) "logistic support" ships for maintenance and repair purposes, underlining the commercial rather than the military aspect of the cooperation.<sup>14</sup> Defense Minister Thanh's remark demonstrates Vietnam's efforts not to alarm China, which was wary of the advancement of Vietnam-U.S. security cooperation. Vietnam's stance carefully limited the areas of cooperation with the United States to non-traditional security areas, and was reflected in Vietnam's responses, including restricting visits to Cam Ranh Bay by U.S. military vessels to once a year.

While Vietnam's wariness of the United States appears to have waned relatively compared to Phase I, Hanoi's considerations towards China as well as the differences in view between the United States and Vietnam over human rights and political systems explain why Vietnam remained cautious about expanding its cooperation with the United States. When President Trương Tấn Sang visited the United States in July 2013, the two countries agreed to form a Comprehensive Partnership, marking the beginning of a new stage in U.S.-Vietnam relationship. On this occasion, the two countries released a Joint Statement which mentioned "respect for...each other's political systems," suggesting that the United States showed a level of understanding towards maintaining Vietnam's political system. Meanwhile, the Joint Statement refers to "narrow differences on human rights" between the two countries, demonstrating that while the differences have narrowed, they still disagreed on their view of the human rights situation.<sup>15</sup>

From Vietnam's perspective, the U.S. arms embargo on Vietnam also played into the concerns over the differences in their human rights views. The U.S. government imposed a complete embargo on equipment sales to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) from 1955 to 1975, including the period of the Vietnam War, and after the war, expanded the embargo to cover the unified country of Vietnam (current Socialist Republic of Vietnam). The arms embargo was retained even after the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1995 with the end of the Cold War. This was because the United States, particularly Congress, had concerns over the human rights situation of Vietnam, a country which maintains a one-party Communist Party regime and

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<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "Panetta's Cam Ranh Bay Visit Symbolizes Growing U.S.-Vietnam Ties," June 3, 2012, <http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=116597>.

<sup>14</sup> "VN và Mỹ thúc đẩy hợp tác quốc phòng song phương," *Thanh niên*, ngày 4-6-2012. At the time, Cam Ranh Bay had a commercial port near the bay mouth and a navy base in the rear (as noted later, Cam Ranh Bay now has a third international port [Cảng Quốc tế] closer to the bay mouth). Nevertheless, Vietnam accepted foreign naval vessels excluding Russia's only to its commercial port.

<sup>15</sup> "Tuyên bố chung của Chủ tịch nước CHXHCN Việt Nam Trương Tấn Sang và Tổng thống Hợp chúng quốc Hoa Kỳ Barack Obama," *Nhân dân*, ngày 26-7-2013.

restricts freedom of speech and religion. The arms embargo was considered as an effective means to apply diplomatic pressure to encourage Vietnam to improve its human rights situation. For Vietnam, the United States' continuation of the arms embargo and pressure to improve the human rights situation signified that the United States would maintain an offensive posture towards the Vietnamese political system and that there would continue to be a lack of political trust between the two countries. For this reason, Vietnamese authorities repeatedly requested the United States to remove the arms embargo at every level of defense strategic dialogues.<sup>16</sup>

During this period, Vietnam went to great lengths to stabilize its relationship with China, notwithstanding the tensions in the South China Sea (or went to even greater lengths because of the tensions). By fostering mutual trust through exchanges between the communist parties and governments of the two countries, along with dialogues and cooperation activities between their militaries, Vietnam sought to stabilize its relationship with China and achieve a balance with cooperative relations with other countries. Such cooperation took various forms. For example, the Vietnam People's Navy has conducted annual joint patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin with the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy since 2009. In addition, their defense ministries have conducted annual strategic defense dialogues since 2010.

The efforts at various types of exchanges and dialogues covering security cooperation culminated in the Agreement on the Basic Principles Guiding the Resolution of Maritime Issues concluded in October 2011—an outcome Vietnam considers as contributing to the stabilization of the Vietnam-China relationship.<sup>17</sup> Since then, Vietnam has striven to coordinate maritime issues with China in accordance with the Agreement. At the foreign ministers' meeting held in February 2012, the two countries reaffirmed the peaceful settlement of maritime issues. At the foreign vice ministerial consultations later that month, the two countries established a director general working-level meeting on the demarcation of territorial limits and joint development outside the Gulf of Tonkin, and agreed to establish a hotline between the Vietnamese and Chinese foreign ministries.<sup>18</sup> In both the joint statement that was released when President Sang visited China in June 2013 and the press release that was issued when Premier Li Keqiang visited Vietnam, it was noted that the two countries commit to “firmly implementing” the Agreement.<sup>19</sup>

### **3. New Developments in Cooperation Following the 2014 Oil Rig Incident (Phase III)**

Vietnam believed that it could properly manage the South China Sea issue to a certain extent by conducting such series of dialogues and agreements with China, while advancing cooperation with the United States. This belief was overturned by the oil drilling incident in the Paracel Islands. The incident began in early May 2014 when China, which has de facto control over the Paracel Islands, installed an oil rig in waters near the Islands to which both countries claimed territorial rights, and commenced drilling operations which were scheduled until August. Vietnam strongly protested

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<sup>16</sup> Murray Hiebert, Phuong Nguyen and Gregory B. Poling, *A New Era in U.S.-Vietnam Relations: Deepening Ties Two Decades after Normalization*, A Report of the CSIS Sumitro Chair for Southeast Asian Studies (June 2014), p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> “Thỏa thuận về những nguyên tắc cơ bản chỉ đạo giải quyết vấn đề trên biển,” *Nhân dân*, ngày 12-10-2011.

<sup>18</sup> Bộ Ngoại giao, “Cuộc gặp giữa hai Thứ trưởng Ngoại giao Việt Nam-Trung Quốc,” ngày 28-2-2012.

<sup>19</sup> Bộ Ngoại giao, “Hội đàm giữa Thủ tướng Nguyễn Tấn Dũng và Thủ tướng Quốc vụ viện nước CHND Trung Hoa Lý Khắc Cường,” ngày 13-10-2013.

and opposed China's moves, seeing them as China's further attempts to make its control of the Paracel Islands a fait accompli.

Vietnam immediately took all possible measures, including repeatedly urging China to terminate its activities, seizing the opportunities of ASEAN meetings to engage in active diplomatic efforts, and announcing that Vietnam was considering bringing the matter before international courts. Moreover, Vietnam dispatched patrol vessels of its Coast Guard and Directorate of Fisheries of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development to the drilling site. Vietnam sought to monitor and stop the oil drilling such as by confronting Chinese vessels at the site and requesting China to remove the drilling equipment. In response, Chinese patrol vessels repeatedly sprayed water cannons and rammed into Vietnamese vessels. Vietnam disclosed photos and videos of China's response and lobbied for international action. The oil rig incident came to an end with China's removal of the drilling equipment in July.

The oil rig incident prompted Vietnam to enhance its security cooperation with other countries including the United States. One of the obstacles was to get the United States to lift its decades-long arms embargo on Vietnam. Vietnam viewed that political trust between the two countries was critical for further deepening security and military cooperation with the United States. The arms embargo was thus an obstacle that had to be overcome from Vietnam's perspective. Following the incident, in late May, Minister of Foreign Affairs Phạm Bình Minh held telephone talks with Secretary of State John Kerry and requested the United States' endorsement and support for Vietnam. In October that year, when Foreign Minister Minh visited the United States and met with Secretary Kerry, the U.S. Government announced the withdrawal of the embargo on Vietnam for maritime security-related defense articles to Vietnam.<sup>20</sup> Foreign Minister Minh stated that he welcomes the U.S. measure because retaining the arms embargo on Vietnam implies that the U.S.-Vietnam relationship was not normal, and expressed his view that this measure would contribute to establishing political trust between the United States and Vietnam.<sup>21</sup>

In June 2015, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter visited Vietnam. Secretary Carter and Minister of National Defense Thanh signed the U.S.-Viet Nam Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations. The content of the Statement is fundamentally along the same lines as that of the 2011 MOU, including continuation of strategic dialogue and non-traditional security cooperation. The Statement suggests strengthening bilateral cooperation on the South China Sea issue, noting, for example, expanding collaboration on maritime security and maritime domain awareness (MDA), including port visits and voyage repair visits to ports by naval vessels.<sup>22</sup>

In a development symbolic of the U.S.-Vietnam convergence, the General Secretary of the Communist Party—the political leader of Vietnam—visited the United States for the first time. In July 2015, General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng became the first head of the Communist Party of Vietnam to visit the United States. The General Secretary underscored Vietnam's stance to cooperate with the United States on the South China Sea issue, and repeatedly made comments that were critical of China and were intended to keep China in check, without identifying China by name. At the summit meeting on July 7, the two countries shared the view that the countries in the

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<sup>20</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Daily Press Briefing by Jen Psaki, Spokesperson," October 2, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Vũ Hoàng, "Việt Nam hoan nghênh Mỹ tiến tới dỡ lệnh cấm vũ khí," *Vnexpress*, ngày 25-9-2014.

<sup>22</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "U.S.-Viet Nam Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations," June 1, 2015.

region had a duty to secure freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, and that the two countries support the peaceful settlement of disputes over territorial rights in conformity with international law and would not condone the use of force or unilateral changes to the status quo. The leaders also discussed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the human rights issue. Regarding the human rights issue, one of the outstanding issues between the two countries, Vietnam stressed that it would “continue a constructive and frank dialogue with the United States.”<sup>23</sup>

With regard to the South China Sea, the U.S.-Vietnam Joint Vision Statement unveiled on the occasion of the summit meeting expresses concern over developments “that have increased tensions, eroded trust, and threatened to undermine peace, security, and stability” and recognizes the imperative of “rejecting coercion, intimidation, and the use or threat of force.”<sup>24</sup> On July 8, General Secretary Trọng delivered an address at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), one of the leading strategy think tanks in Washington, D.C. General Secretary Trọng welcomed the United States’ increasing interest in the South China Sea issue and underscored that the United States and Vietnam have shared interests in the issue. In particular, his reference to “non-use or threat of force, refraining from unilateral actions to change status quo, militarization or imposition of control over the waters and airspace in the East Sea” clearly had China in mind and was a rather bold statement for the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam.<sup>25</sup>

Vietnam opened its third international port in Cam Ranh Bay in March 2016 and began to accept foreign naval vessels more actively. In October 2016, two combat vessels of the U.S. Navy made their first port calls at the port. The United States also enhanced its capacity building assistance in maritime security. In April 2016, the U.S. Department of Defense commenced the Maritime Security Initiative (MSI), a program designed to support improvements in the intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR) and MDA capabilities of Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam—the ASEAN disputants in the South China Sea issue. Under MSI, the United States decided to contribute US\$2 million for Vietnam’s maritime patrol aircraft and vessel modernization; building of search and rescue command, control, and communications systems as well as training.<sup>26</sup>

The U.S. government completely abolished the arms embargo on Vietnam during President Obama’s visit to Vietnam. During the President’s visit to Vietnam in May 2016, the U.S. government announced that it would completely abolish the arms embargo on Vietnam.<sup>27</sup> It is not necessarily clear in what circumstances discussions took place between the U.S. government and Congress on lifting the arms embargo. It is inferred that the U.S. government had a strong desire to deepen security cooperation with Vietnam, and given that some improvements could be found in the human rights situation of Vietnam, the U.S. government decided to completely abolish the embargo.

Vietnam could conceivably introduce U.S. equipment to primarily improve maritime

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<sup>23</sup> “Tuyên bố về Tầm nhìn chung Việt Nam-Hoa Kỳ,” *Nhân dân*, ngày 8-7-2015.

<sup>24</sup> The White House, “United States – Vietnam Joint Vision Statement,” July 7, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Báo Điện tử Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, “Quan hệ Việt Nam-Hoa Kỳ trong giai đoạn phát triển mới,” ngày 9-7-2015.

<sup>26</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, “US Kicks Off New Maritime Security Initiative for Southeast Asia,” *The Diplomat*, April 10, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> The White House, “Remarks by President Obama and President Quang of Vietnam in Joint Press Conference,” May 23, 2016.

defense capabilities. If the arms embargo is abolished and Vietnam actually introduces U.S.-made equipment, this will contribute to strengthening Vietnam's maritime defense capabilities especially from the perspective of improving MDA and ISR capabilities. Accordingly, some media reports have listed individual equipment names, such as drones, radar systems, coastal patrol boats, and P-3 Orion patrol aircraft.<sup>28</sup> As regards developments between the two governments, their defense ministries launched a working group on defense equipment trade in 2015, which has begun making considerations.<sup>29</sup> However, at present, they do not seem to have a concrete plan. In an interview at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2016, Vice Defense Minister Vĩnh emphasized the political significance of the lifting of the arms embargo, stating that, "The removal of the embargo is not just significant in terms of trade, but also in terms of improving high-level trust and confidence." He noted, "We are not sure what we can buy from the U.S. or what we want to buy" and "It is at a very, very first step, I should stress," suggesting that at this point in time Vietnam does not have a concrete procurement plan.<sup>30</sup> In actually introducing U.S. equipment, Vietnam faces many issues to be overcome, including price, amount of time required for procedures, training of personnel who will operate the equipment, maintenance, interoperability with Russian-made equipment that accounts for roughly 90% of Vietnamese equipment systems, and coordinating the relationship with Russia that is one of Vietnam's leading equipment suppliers.

#### **4. The Trump Administration and Vietnam's Security Cooperation with the United States: Present and Outlook**

The new Trump administration was inaugurated in January 2017. With the establishment of an administration that is one of the most exceptional in the history of U.S. politics, the direction of the East Asian strategic environment, including the security of the South China Sea and Vietnam, became shrouded in uncertainty at the beginning of the administration, particularly over the United States' involvement in the security of this region. Furthermore, shortly after taking office, President Trump signed an executive order that withdrew the United States from the TPP. For Vietnam, participating in the TPP had not only economic usefulness but also security significance in reducing Vietnam's economic dependence on China. The U.S. withdrawal from the TPP resulted in indirectly decreasing the United States' engagement in the security of Vietnam.

In this context, Vietnam continued to pursue omnidirectional military diplomacy, or in a broader sense, omnidirectional external relations that include China. For example, General Secretary Trọng paid his third visit to China during his term as General Secretary in January 2017 and met with President Xi Jinping. During the General Secretary's visit to China, Vietnam and China signed the Joint Vision Statement on Cooperation Between the Vietnamese and Chinese Defense Ministries to 2025 and 15 other agreements and MOUs. The Vietnam-China Joint Statement states that the two countries would proactively advance an economic development strategy, including China's Belt and Road Initiative. With regard to the South China Sea, the Joint Statement only briefly mentioned implementation of the DOC and the early conclusion of the COC.<sup>31</sup> Amidst the

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<sup>28</sup> "U.S. lifts arms ban on old foe Vietnam as China tensions simmer," *Reuters*, May 23, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Murray Hiebert, "Fully Lifting the U.S. Lethal Arms Ban Will Add Momentum to U.S.-Vietnam Relations," p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> "Vietnamese general says first purchase of U.S. weapons some way off," *Reuters*, June 4, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Báo Điện tử Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, "Thông cáo chung Việt Nam – Trung Quốc," ngày 14-1-2017.

veil of uncertainty over the future of Vietnam-U.S. cooperation, Vietnam demonstrated its stance to give further considerations to stabilizing its relationship with China.

In 2017, Vietnam engaged in dynamic diplomatic activities from the viewpoint of fostering relations with the new U.S. administration. Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc visited the United States at the end of May and met with President Trump. At the meeting, the two countries discussed economic issues as well as the South China Sea and confirmed the importance of freedoms of navigation and overflight and support for the peaceful settlement of issues that fully reflects the legal process.<sup>32</sup> It was reported that the realization of the meeting with President Trump by Prime Minister Phúc, the first leader of an ASEAN member state to meet President Trump, represented a successful outcome of active lobbying activities by Vietnamese diplomatic authorities in Washington, D.C.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, in November 2017, President Trump visited Vietnam. While the direct motivation behind the President's visit to Vietnam was to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Economic Leaders' Meeting in Danang, following the meeting the President went to Hanoi and held a series of meetings with the heads of Vietnam's political leadership. The Joint Statement released on the occasion of the President's visit to Vietnam notes at the outset: "respect for the United Nations Charter and international law" and respect for "each other's independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and respective political systems." In addition to hinting at the South China Sea issue, the Joint Statement on the last page stresses the need for freedom of navigation in these waters and caution over the advances in militarization of disputed features. In this regard, Vietnam succeeded in obtaining a level of commitment from the United States regarding U.S. engagement in the South China Sea issue.<sup>34</sup>

Regarding security cooperation, in early August, Minister of National Defense Ngô Xuân Lịch visited Washington, D.C. and met with Secretary of Defense James Mattis. At the meeting, the two countries agreed that a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier would make a port call in Vietnam for the first time in 2018.<sup>35</sup> Vietnam's consent to accepting U.S. aircraft carriers demonstrates Vietnam's intention to further strengthen its cooperation with the United States. In October 2017, a Defense Policy Dialogue was conducted in Washington, D.C., indicating that the defense authorities of the two countries were steadily implementing regular activities. In March 2018, the U.S. Navy aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson visited Danang. This was the first time since the end of the Vietnam War in the 1970s for the U.S. Navy aircraft carrier to visit a port in Vietnam.

## **Conclusion**

Vietnam-U.S. ties were severed for many years following the Vietnam War. The two countries normalized their diplomatic relations in 1995, and security cooperation between the two countries commenced at this timing. Initially, the cooperation took place in highly incremental steps. Vietnam's prudent stance can be explained by its fear towards "peaceful evolution," and attempt to prevent an over-strengthening of Vietnam's relations with the United States to achieve a balance

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<sup>32</sup> Báo Điện tử Chính phủ Nước Cộng hòa Xã hội Chủ nghĩa Việt Nam, "Tuyên bố chung về tăng cường Đối tác toàn diện giữa Việt Nam và Hoa Kỳ," ngày 1-6-2017, <http://thutuong.chinhphu.vn/Home/Tuyen-bo-chung-ve-tang-cuong-Doi-tac-toan-dien-giua-Viet-Nam-va-Hoa-Ky/20176/26564.vgp>.

<sup>33</sup> "Hanoi's White House lobbying coup brings strategic gains," *Today* (Singapore), June 5, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> "Tuyên bố chung Việt Nam-Hoa Kỳ," *Nhân dân*, ngày 13-11-2017.

<sup>35</sup> "Vietnam wins US defence pledges as tensions with China grow," *Today* (Singapore), August 10, 2017.

in its external relations. In terms of pursuing balance, Vietnam paid particular considerations to its relationship with China.

The turning point that accelerated Vietnam's security cooperation with the United States was the reemergence of the South China Sea issue due to China's resumption of forays into these waters. The South China Sea became a serious security issue for Vietnam, which, like China, claims territorial rights to the South China Sea. At the same time, the United States enhanced its engagement in the South China Sea to ensure freedom of navigation in the waters. Due to the convergence of Vietnamese and U.S. strategic interests in the South China Sea, their security cooperation has made significant strides in recent years. This development was further promoted by the oil rig incident in 2014. At present, U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation primarily takes four forms: strategic dialogue; regular visits to Vietnam by the U.S. Navy and joint naval exercises; Vietnam's acceptance of the U.S. Navy at Cam Ranh Bay and other ports and an increasing U.S. military presence; and capacity building assistance in maritime security.

Vietnam is steadily fostering its cooperative relations with the new Trump administration of the United States. Uncertainties, however, remain over U.S. engagement. Vietnam is thus expected to continue to pursue an omnidirectional military diplomacy, or in a broader sense, omnidirectional external relations that include China. It is difficult to foresee the Trump administration's South China Sea policy, particularly its approach to ASEAN member states including Vietnam. Under such circumstances, Vietnam will likely continue to seek to cautiously balance its relationship with the United States and China.

**Table 1 Areas and Forms of Cooperation in the “U.S.-Viet Nam Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations” (June 2015)**

Conduct increased cooperative activities to enhance trust and mutual understanding
Collaborate in multinational fora and organizations—including ASEAN—when it is in their common interest
Strengthen the capabilities of our defense institutions and militaries to enhance cooperation, promote security, and address non-traditional security threats
Expand defense trade between our countries, potentially including cooperation in the production of new technologies and equipment, where possible under current law and policy restrictions
Expand collaboration on maritime security and maritime domain awareness, including, where possible, port visits and voyage repair visits to ports and facilities of each country, as mutually identified
Expand training and education opportunities of each country's military academic institutions
Strengthen the ability of each country to conduct search and rescue activities and respond quickly to disasters and provide humanitarian response
Assist in building capacity to conduct successful United Nations peacekeeping operations
Increase exchanges of information and best practices on topics of mutual interest, including science and defense technology exchanges
Enhance cooperation to overcome the legacies from the war
Continue strategic-level discussions by senior leadership from each side's defense ministry on international security issues of mutual interest
Welcome regular exchanges of defense leadership to each country

Source: U.S. Department of Defense, “U.S.-Viet Nam Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations between the Department of Defense of the United States of America and the Ministry of National Defense of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam,” June 1, 2015.

**Table 2 Security-Related Items in the “United States-Vietnam Joint Vision Statement” (July 2015)**

<p>The United States and Vietnam reaffirm continued bilateral cooperation in defense and security, as outlined in the United States – Vietnam Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations. Both countries underscore their commitment to collaborating on, among other issues, addressing non-traditional security threats, cooperation in maritime security, maritime domain awareness, defense trade and information sharing, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and defense technology exchange. Both countries welcome joint efforts to address war legacy issues, including the humanitarian mission of missing in action (MIA) recovery, the clearance of unexploded ordnance, dioxin remediation, and further assistance for these humanitarian efforts.</p>
<p>The two countries are committed to promoting cooperation on traditional security threats and non-traditional threats, including natural disasters, wildlife trafficking, and water security, and to preventing and properly addressing these threats. The two countries are committed to expanding collaboration on peacekeeping operations and climate change and look forward to the 2016 Nuclear Security Summit and to concrete national actions to promote nuclear security. The two countries pledge to expand cooperation on the Global Health Security Agenda (GHSa), including toward achieving the GHSa targets as soon as possible.</p>
<p>Both countries are concerned about recent developments in the South China Sea that have increased tensions, eroded trust, and threatened to undermine peace, security, and stability. They underscore the imperative of upholding the internationally-recognized freedoms of navigation and overflight; unimpeded lawful commerce; and maritime security and safety. They are concerned that restricting such activities would raise tensions. They will ensure that actions and activities taken comply with international law. Both countries reject coercion through the use or threat of force. Both countries support the peaceful resolution of disputes in conformity with international law, including as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 1982 (UNCLOS), and the Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, and welcome efforts to conclude the Code of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea.</p>
<p>A memorandum of cooperation on United Nations peacekeeping operations between the defense ministries of the United States and Vietnam was reached between the two countries.</p>

Source: The White House, “United States-Vietnam Joint Vision Statement,” July 7, 2015.

**Table 3 Security-Related Items in the “Joint Statement between the United States of America and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam” (May 2016)**

Enhancing Security and Defense Cooperation

<p>The United States and Vietnam reaffirmed their commitment to strengthen defense cooperation between the two countries as outlined in the Memorandum of Understanding on Advancing Bilateral Defense Cooperation in 2011 and the U.S.-Vietnam Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations signed in 2015, giving priority to humanitarian cooperation, war legacy, maritime security, peacekeeping, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Both sides reiterated they would continue to strengthen cooperation in the fields of security, combatting transnational crime, and cyber security. Vietnam welcomed the U.S. government decision to fully lift the ban on the sale of lethal weapons to Vietnam. Vietnam welcomed U.S. maritime security assistance – including through the Maritime Security Initiative (MSI), the Cooperative Threat Reduction program, and Foreign Military Financing – and looked forward to working with the United States to enhance Vietnam’s maritime capabilities. The United States and Vietnam signed a letter of intent to establish a working group for the Cooperative Humanitarian and Medical Storage Initiative (CHAMSI), which will advance cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. The United States reaffirmed its support for Vietnam’s peacekeeping efforts with an aim of assisting Vietnam’s first deployment of UN peacekeeping forces by 2017.</p>
<p>Both countries expressed their satisfaction with their joint efforts to advance humanitarian and war legacy issues. In particular, the United States valued Vietnam’s active cooperation to support the humanitarian mission of providing the fullest possible accounting for U.S. personnel still missing from the war. Both sides committed to continue their cooperation on unexploded ordnance removal. Vietnam welcomed cooperation leading to the successful conclusion of the first phase of dioxin remediation at Danang International Airport, with the final phase already underway. The United States committed to partnering with Vietnam to make a significant contribution to the clean-up of dioxin contamination at Bien Hoa Air Base.</p>

Source: The White House, “Joint Statement between the United States of America and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam,” May 23, 2016.