

BACKGROUND

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U.S.–Vietnam Defense Relations: Investing in Strategic Alignment

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Abstract

Despite the improving relationship between the U.S. and Vietnamese defense establishments, the strategic imperatives of the U.S. and Vietnam are developing in different ways at different speeds. Both countries have complex relationships with China and stakeholders who militate against strategic clarity on the most salient issue they face—the rise of Chinese power. The two countries have also prioritized objectives for U.S.–Vietnamese relations that cannot be met in the near term. The U.S. wants greater access to Vietnamese ports for its warships and Vietnam wants the U.S. to remove restrictions on arms sales. In light of this impasse, the U.S. should focus on building an ambitious program of defense cooperation with Vietnam that will lay the groundwork for a closer strategic relationship down the road.

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Following his appearance this June at the annual Asia Security Summit, or “Shangri-la Dialogue,”¹ where he stressed a “deeper and more enduring [American] partnership role in advancing the security and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region,”² Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta paid a visit to one of America’s most promising new security partners—Vietnam. Secretary Panetta focused the substance of his visit on practical steps to carry out a September 2011 memorandum of understanding (MOU) on bilateral defense cooperation. But what really caught the attention of the international media was Panetta’s trip to Cam Ranh Bay, the site of a former major U.S. military base in the South China Sea, and one of the finest deepwater ports in the world. Panetta told U.S. sailors aboard the USNS *Richard Byrd* in Cam Ranh Bay that U.S. naval ships’ access to the facility at Cam Ranh was “a key component” of the bilateral defense relationship and one that pointed to “tremendous potential” for future cooperation between the U.S. and Vietnam.³ U.S. warships do not have access to the Cam Ranh harbor. Other ships, such as the *Richard Byrd*, a cargo ship operated by the Navy’s Military Sealift Command manned

KEY POINTS

- The U.S. and Vietnam have mutual, though not identical, interests in mitigating negative impacts of China’s rise in East Asia and the Pacific. Closer defense cooperation between the U.S. and Vietnam is in the interest of both nations for the long term.
- The big priorities—U.S. arms sales for Vietnam, and access to Cam Ranh Bay for the U.S.—should be set aside in the interest of developing a defense relationship that can serve as the basis for longer-term strategic cooperation.
- The U.S. should focus on improving the value proposition of U.S.–Vietnamese defense ties through enhanced training and education, and as much operational contact as the relationship will bear.
- Both Vietnam and the U.S. have complex relationships with China, and Vietnam does not view its relationships with the U.S. and China in zero-sum terms.
- The U.S. must exercise flexibility and patience as Vietnam’s strategic outlook evolves.

by a largely civilian crew, however, do. U.S. Navy warships visit Vietnam in the context of normal and routine naval diplomacy, docking in Da Nang.

Panetta's vision of the role that Vietnamese facilities would play in the context of the evolving U.S. defense posture in the region suggested something at least slightly beyond routine port calls of American warships at Da Nang and Ho Chi Minh City, and other U.S. Naval visits to commercially based repair and refitting stops in Cam Ranh. The U.S. vision for Cam Ranh Bay, also likely hinted at in Secretary Panetta's meetings in Hanoi, is diametrically opposed to the Vietnamese conception of the role that Cam Ranh should play in the relationship. In the mid and late 1990s, as the process of the normalization of relations between Washington and Hanoi moved forward, Hanoi studiously took the position that the question of access to Cam Ranh Bay and other facilities should not figure in efforts to expand contacts and increase mutual awareness of one another's defense and security policies and interests. At the joint briefing with Secretary Panetta, the Vietnamese defense minister, Phung Quang Thanh, reiterated this position. Thanh downplayed Vietnam's willingness to expand access to U.S. Navy ships at

Cam Ranh Bay. U.S. Navy ships seeking repairs, he said, are welcome to dock at the commercial port of Cam Ranh, where they would find skilled Vietnamese labor at competitive prices.⁴

More broadly, Vietnam has consistently discouraged the view that an expanded U.S.–Vietnamese relationship would afford Washington greater leverage toward its own foreign policy goals or that a U.S. presence in Cam Ranh would offer the U.S. a strategic advantage in the region.

While the Vietnamese suspect that the allure of facility access was the driving force and key strategic rationale powering the American pursuit of a more normal footing for relations with Vietnam, their own motivation has been the lifting of restrictions on the sale of lethal material to the Vietnamese military, and the role this should play in modernizing Vietnam's military.

These are the two big issues in the relationship between the U.S. Department of Defense and Vietnam's Ministry of Defense. They are unlikely to be resolved anytime soon—as both sides continue to have doubts about the other's long-term strategic intentions. This situation should not prevent progress, however. Even amid doubts, the two sides can prepare the way for long-term

strategic options. They can develop an ambitious program of cooperation between their militaries that can forge the basis for a closer defense partnership, and ultimately deliver on both sides' priority needs.

This will require flexibility and patience on America's part. The Vietnamese are comfortable with the existing level of activity in the defense relationship and will not be terribly inclined to press into new areas until they are satisfied that new activities are congruent with Vietnam's national interests, supportive of Vietnam's commitment to regional engagement rules of the road as articulated by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), firmly supportive of nonalignment precepts that are so important to Hanoi, and situated in existing United Nations practices, international laws, and guidelines common to U.N. members.

In terms of process, this requires identifying familiar forms of interaction as the means of introducing new ideas, using existing mechanisms of communication as the way to socialize new initiatives, and finding the least dramatic way of accomplishing a new activity. It will pay to frame advances in the vocabulary of the existing relationship to use “informational exchanges” to introduce new ideas, and to continue to use

1. Sponsored by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). IISS, “The Shangri-La Dialogue: 2012,” <http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2012/> (accessed June 18, 2012).
2. News transcript, “Remarks by Secretary Panetta at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore,” U.S. Department of Defense, June 2, 2012, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5049> (accessed June 27, 2012).
3. “Panetta Urges More U.S. Naval Access to Vietnam Harbor,” Defense Forum India, June 3, 2012, <http://defenceforumindia.com/forum/indo-pacific-east-asia/37153-panetta-urges-more-us-naval-access-vietnam-harbor.html> (accessed June 18, 2012).
4. News transcript, “Joint Press Briefing with Secretary Panetta and Vietnamese Minister of Defense Gen. Phung Quang Thanh from Hanoi, Vietnam,” U.S. Department of Defense, June 4, 2012, <http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=5052> (accessed June 19, 2012). What this means is that Vietnam will continue to impose limitations on U.S. ship repair in Cam Ranh Bay, so that only support/logistics and non-combatant vessels could be serviced and repaired there. However, it is reasonable to suggest that over time the Vietnamese might become flexible enough to entertain the possibility of the expansion and enhancement of parameters based on progress and mutual benefit—opening the facility to repair of capital ships and combatants would be a logical progressive step as the defense relationship matures.

formulas that enshrine the reciprocal dimension of the relationship. Perhaps most important, the U.S. will have to minimize rhetoric that proclaims every success on its side as a net loss for China, and develop new initiatives in keeping with ASEAN priorities.

In terms of substance, this means helping Vietnam to adopt procedures that are the foundation for interoperability with the U.S. and regional friends and partners, and standards of behavior and comportment that are the hallmarks of a professional military force. It also means creating as much operational contact between the militaries as the traffic will bear. Bilateral operational experience gained in the late 1980s and 1990s during joint field activities to account for prisoners of war and those missing in action (POW/MIA) from the Vietnam war⁵ considerably enhanced both sides' effectiveness in planning and executing joint activities, with significant lessons learned in coordination, communications, safety, transportation, and a host of other activities arising from host-nation and guest-nation participation.

To these ends, the U.S. should expand education and training opportunities for Vietnam by tailoring training packages for Vietnam in (1) logistics, services, transportation, and facilities support to international organizations; (2) humanitarian response to civil and natural incidents; (3) peacekeeping; and (4) roles, missions, and responsibilities of the military in international combined military efforts. The U.S. and Vietnam should also operationalize these packages by instituting

bilateral communication, coordination, and command-post exercises (within the constraint of Vietnamese antipathy to on-the-ground force exercises). Operational contact that permits both sides to observe the effects of command and control are considered to be the most effective mechanism for implementing training concepts and methods. U.S.-Vietnam defense relations are much closer than they were 15 years ago, but they have developed very slowly. The U.S.-Vietnam bilateral defense relationship developed over three phases.

Phase I. The Development of Bilateral Defense Relations: First Flirtations

The first phase, from initial contacts during which the notion of defense normalization was broached in 1995 and 1996 to the preparations for the visit of then-Secretary of Defense William Cohen in 2000, was characterized by Vietnamese caution regarding U.S. intentions, as well as Washington reserve and concern regarding the importance of preserving a priority focus on POW/MIA issues.

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Vietnam's Defense Ministry was reluctant to be drawn into activities and actions that could be interpreted by regional observers as a firm and warm embrace of the fledgling defense relationship, and the U.S.

government focused tightly on economic, trade, consular, and diplomatic normalization. The Vietnamese Defense Ministry was perfectly content to keep the pace constrained and the scope modest, and the U.S. Department of Defense was prepared to stick with an exploratory approach that focused on uncontroversial areas as the starting point for bilateral military engagement.

The first years of interaction between the Vietnamese and the U.S. defense establishments revolved around learning about one another, developing a common language, becoming accustomed to the differences between the manner in which policy was managed and authority was exercised by the respective ministries, and learning to work with the personalities who were the mainstay of the relationship. In 1997, the U.S.-Vietnamese defense relationship consisted of three types of activities: multilateral conferences and seminars hosted by the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM); senior-level military visits; and practical bilateral cooperation in areas such as search and rescue (SAR), military medicine, environmental security, and de-mining.

In 1996 and 1997, the U.S. offered the Vietnamese Defense Ministry a range of starting points for ground-floor-level military engagement, and adduced a series of simple precepts for defense relations: POW/MIA issues remained the national priority; all activities had to be transparent and not aimed at impacting the equities of other bilateral defense relations; the relationship was to unfold in a carefully calibrated manner

5. These were joint operations in the classic military sense, with the U.S. and Vietnam collaborating to investigate and resolve losses by uncovering material evidence, locating witnesses to lead them to crash and gravesites, and jointly recovering the individuals and crews from the loss incident using archaeological and anthropological techniques.

intended to be slow and deliberate; and the relationship was to be a “two-way street.”

The Vietnamese reacted in early 1997 with a parallel set of starting points that emphasized sovereignty, independence, national dignity, and the importance of a cautious, modest pace for the process of normalization. The decision by the 9th Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party to retain an extremely modest focus on (1) military medicine, (2) military scientific and technological cooperation, and (3) disaster relief/humanitarian projects provided the core guidance for the Defense Ministry’s approach to this relationship from the earliest joint activities in 1997 to at least 2001.⁶

The primary channel of communication was the working-level contacts between representatives of the U.S. Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (ISA) and the Vietnamese Defense Ministry’s External Relations Department (ERD).

Senior officials at the Vietnamese Defense Ministry found it difficult to understand U.S. government intentions, and sought to limit the scope of the relationship. Thus, while the U.S. referred to “defense relations,” the Vietnamese spoke of “military-to-military contacts,” implying a relationship that was vastly more confined and modest than a defense relationship. Eventually, as the relationship attained a level of routine and as both sides sought a consistent level of communication, the phrase “military-to-military” lost its original

distinction and became the accepted term used by both parties.

Despite such limitations and suspicions, the U.S.–Vietnamese defense relationship stacked up a number of achievements between 1996 and 1999, including the November 1996 introductory visit of the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs to Hanoi that kicked off the defense relationship, the February 1997 trip to Hanoi by the PACOM commander, and the March 1997 arrival of Vietnam’s first defense attaché in Washington. In October 1998, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam visited the Pentagon followed by Deputy Defense Minister Tran Hanh’s trip to the U.S. that same month. The relationship picked up steam in 1999 with ISA–ERD planning meetings, a successful Air War College visit to Vietnam including the first flight line visit to Nha Trang Pilot’s School, and an April 1999 visit to Vietnam by U.S. military engineers that initiated the important de-mining training program. Finally, after lengthy discussions, the increased contact culminated in then-Secretary of Defense William Cohen’s trip to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in March 2000.

Phase 2. Circumspect Courtship

Between 2000 and 2004, the U.S. made the first efforts to modestly expand the scope and pace of defense engagement with Vietnam. Vietnam clarified the more rigid aspects of its position on enhanced defense relations, and resisted anything beyond

the most symbolic forward movement in defense relations.

Lingering attitudes regarding the wartime enmity between Hanoi and Washington were confronted by direct reference to benefits that the U.S.–Vietnam relationship could offer a modernizing Vietnamese military. The Vietnamese had a clearly declared objection to anything that smacked of explicitly military education, continuously asserted during this “courtship” period. Once the U.S. described proposed initiatives in terms that defined what the activity represented while de-emphasizing sensitive words, the U.S. Defense Department could often press beyond ERD’s objections and concerns.

LINGERING ATTITUDES REGARDING THE WARTIME ENMITY BETWEEN HANOI AND WASHINGTON WERE CONFRONTED BY DIRECT REFERENCE TO BENEFITS THAT THE U.S.–VIETNAM RELATIONSHIP COULD OFFER A MODERNIZING VIETNAMESE MILITARY.

For instance, vetting Vietnamese candidates for participation in military education programs, and other legal requirements intended to certify Vietnamese participants as untarnished by any prior human rights violations represented a potentially insurmountable hurdle. So the U.S. instead described the legislatively mandated vetting as the most effective means of identifying professional military officers who

6. During then-Assistant Secretary of Defense Peter Rodman’s visit to Hanoi in summer 2005, Defense Minister Pham Van Tra articulated this trilogy of interests, clearly indicating that this approach continued to define the maximum feasible parameters for bilateral defense cooperation, and that it was based on the highest level of authority.

would profit from participation in proposed events. Often, that satisfied Vietnamese concerns and allowed the Vietnamese Defense Ministry enough of a comfort level to authorize the People's Army to participate in PACOM-hosted seminars, multi-lateral conferences, and other educational opportunities.

Throughout the tenure of three defense ministers, the Vietnamese military carefully made it clear that Hanoi would never put troops in the field with uniformed U.S. forces for the purposes of joint activities or training on Vietnamese soil. Over time, training possibilities took on new and unique shapes and the U.S. government explored those possibilities with the Vietnamese (such as training in peacekeeping methods). Still, the Vietnamese were slow to show any inclination to get past their own nationalist rhetoric. It seemed as though it might be necessary to wait until the generation of Soviet-trained and Chinese-trained troops and engineers passed from the scene or became helpless in the face of new technologies before the Vietnamese would become more receptive to working with the U.S. military.

However, pronounced Vietnamese military reluctance to ratchet up activities that smacked of close defense cooperation did not altogether preclude the possibility of Defense Ministry officials recognizing the dividends that could derive from the relationship with the U.S. military. In working level-discussions during the early 2000s, the U.S. Defense Department made clear its view regarding the utility and positive contribution that American ship visits could make to global naval diplomacy. The Vietnamese stuck to their stated disinterest in port calls, noting that a decision on ship visits would have to come from the top, and

could not be driven by inspired discussions at planning sessions. During Secretary Cohen's March 2000 visit to Hanoi, he and Defense Minister Pham Van Tra agreed that ship visits would be a positive aspect of a gradually expanding plan for military engagement.

Following Cohen's visit, on the instructions of the minister, the Vietnamese Defense Ministry entered into a long series of technical discussions with Pacific Fleet representatives that, in late 2003, enabled the first U.S. Navy port call in Vietnam.

From 2000 to 2004, the Vietnamese Defense Ministry worked hard to make sure that its commitment to enhanced military engagement was not perceived as a tilt in overall foreign policy objectives toward a one-sided reliance on a single friendship. Indeed, the Defense Ministry did not agree to an increased tempo of Defense Department leadership visits, nor did it entertain the possibility of expert-level consultations on possible future topics for bilateral cooperation until there were assurances that the decisions would not have a strategic impact on the relationships about which the Vietnamese remained most concerned: bilateral links with China, multilateral links with Southeast Asian neighbors, and organized interaction with ASEAN.

The senior-most leadership of the Vietnamese Defense Ministry decided to press forward on bilateral initiatives with the U.S. only at the moment it became clear there would be no strategic consequences to enhancing bilateral defense relations between Hanoi and Washington. Once it was clear that the primary advantage of ship visits came in the form of dividends to local economies, the Vietnamese easily embraced

U.S. Navy port calls as part of the relationship. Likewise, once it was clear that U.S. proposals regarding increased search and rescue cooperation resonated positively with ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) activities, it became easier for both the U.S. and Vietnam to proceed with activities intended to strengthen the Vietnamese Defense Ministry's ability to collaborate with other ASEAN militaries after natural disasters. Finally, once the leadership in Hanoi was content that there would be no consequential blowback from China regarding the U.S.-Vietnam defense relationship, a variety of possibilities, including training and foreign military assistance, became easier to accomplish.

In 2002, the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy began to explore ways to broaden U.S. defense interaction with Vietnam. The Pentagon believed that new activities could be easily integrated into the existing plan, and that shared concerns for the well-being of Southeast Asia and a common approach to broad transnational issues in the region suggested a natural basis for strategic community between Hanoi and Washington. Senior Defense Department officials saw the clear-cut similarities in strategic viewpoints between Hanoi and Washington as the basis for the argument that the U.S. should be able to build on existing relationships, recent precedent-setting meetings, and a generally positive predisposition in favor of the bilateral defense relationship.

The November 2003 visit to the U.S. by former Defense Minister Tra and the first U.S. Navy ship visit in the same month jump-started a sweep of successes that fueled progress in developing normal military relations through

2008. The relationship experienced a burst of positive momentum beginning with the uniquely positive meeting between Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Prime Minister Phan Van Khai in Washington, D.C., in mid-2005, continuing with Secretary Rumsfeld's visit to Hanoi in mid-2006, and the unprecedented visit to the Pentagon by Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung in June 2008.

Phase 3. Budding Strategic Cooperation

Between 2005 and 2010, the U.S.–Vietnam defense relationship began to take on strategic implications, touching on the core issues in the mil-to-mil relationship and broadly “expanding” cooperation and dialogue.

In 2005, Hanoi signed the end-user agreement that was the prerequisite for starting International Military Education and Training (IMET) and non-lethal foreign military sales, and a year later the U.S. modified International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) restrictions to enable some constrained non-lethal arms sales.

On the access side of the equation, the U.S. and Vietnam laid out a plan for port calls by U.S. Navy vessels and, after five years, the Vietnamese side managed to carve out some flexibility in the one-ship-per-year rule. Even though a U.S. Navy gray hull had already eaten up the allotted single slots in Vietnam's port call dance card, Vietnam allowed an additional hydrographic U.S. Navy vessel and later a U.S. Navy humanitarian ship to enter Vietnamese waters for coast visits in 2007 and 2008.

The Vietnamese, though still unwilling to entertain American access interests, became more inclined to support informal discussions about steps that could enhance the relationship and take mil-to-mil engagement to the next level, and infuse some real strategic content into the defense relationship. The Defense Ministry began to seriously explore objectives with strategic implications, such as a closer, formal interaction focused on building disaster-response capabilities for the People's Army and a more effective means of interacting on search and rescue operations and exercises. Cooperation in these areas, as well as on de-mining, were consistently high-quality engagements involving well-thought-out interactions at the specialist level. In addition, the Vietnamese entertained possibilities of peacekeeping training, simple joint naval exercises such as a “passing exercise” (PASSEX), discussion of a possible Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), a strategic dialogue between the Vietnamese Defense Ministry and the U.S. Secretary of Defense, hydrographic cooperation, and joint studies of the strategic impact of meteorological shifts and sea level changes.

In the same time frame, the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry resumed a more active role in defense and security relations, returning to a level of involvement that characterized the role the Foreign Ministry played during the first working level discussions of the modalities of mil-to-mil normalization in 1994 and 1995. In June 2008, during Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's visit to Washington, where

he met with President George W. Bush and a separate visit to the Pentagon for talks with the Secretary of Defense, Hanoi agreed to a State Department–Foreign Ministry-led political–military dialogue, which took place in early October 2008. The Vietnamese embassy sought to invigorate lines of communication between the Vietnamese Defense Ministry and the Department of Defense and its think tanks, such as the National Defense University's (NDU) Institute for National Strategic Studies.⁷

THE VIETNAMESE, THOUGH STILL UNWILLING TO ENTERTAIN AMERICAN ACCESS INTERESTS, BECAME MORE INCLINED TO SUPPORT INFORMAL DISCUSSIONS ABOUT STEPS THAT COULD ENHANCE THE RELATIONSHIP AND TAKE MIL-TO-MIL ENGAGEMENT TO THE NEXT LEVEL, AND INFUSE SOME REAL STRATEGIC CONTENT INTO THE DEFENSE RELATIONSHIP.

Later in 2008, the Bush Administration focused on how the Department of Defense should shape efforts to move the tempo and spectrum of cooperation to higher levels. Senior officials felt the need for a new organizational concept that went beyond the idea that the relationship should proceed cautiously and incrementally. The idea that there were regional sensitivities to increasing proximity between Hanoi and Washington struck many as an old notion. The region itself had seen the steadily enhanced relationship

7. Lewis M. Stern, “National Defense University: Building Strategic Relations with Vietnam,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, April 2012, <http://www.ndu.edu/press/building-strategic-relations-with-vietnam.html> (accessed July 2, 2012).

between the U.S. and Vietnam as a development that coincided with regional goals.

In 2007 and 2008 the Vietnamese Defense establishment was increasingly receptive to the argument that the initial constraining parameters that helped define the modest pace and scope of defense relations in the start-up period of U.S.–Vietnamese military relations could be modified. The Vietnamese Defense Ministry was well disposed, for example, to the idea of a mil-to-mil policy-level dialogue, something that was discussed briefly at the meeting between Secretary Gates and Prime Minister Dung in June, and had earlier been an agenda item in a variety of exploratory private discussions with senior and middle-level Defense Ministry officials. This suggested a Vietnamese interest in discussions that could push the relationship toward bilateral dialogue on regional defense issues, strategic thinking, plans, and intentions regarding defense relations in the region as well as defense modernization and requirements. Yet there still was no constituency in the Defense Ministry for discarding restraint and plunging into active cooperation on a strategic level, considering possible joint training and exercise opportunities, or ratcheting up cooperation in resource management reform, military professionalization, or doctrinal modernization.

By 2010, both sides had experienced slightly more than 12 formal years of mil-to-mil engagement. The U.S. had placed a succession of four defense attachés in Hanoi since December 1995. Vietnam had assigned four successive talented senior colonels to Washington since March 1997. Vietnamese officers associated with the earliest days of

the defense relationship had been promoted in rank and elevated in assignments. A former defense attaché in Washington had become the deputy director of the Military Strategy Institute in 2006. Junior People's Army officers who served as staff functionaries supporting the ERD's negotiations with the Department of Defense from 1997 to 2001 had been elevated to key jobs in the leadership suite of the ERD. Similarly, former U.S. defense attachés had returned to Washington and taken leadership positions with the Joint Staff and with the Defense Language Institute.

The Vietnamese Defense Ministry leadership that was responsible for the start-up discussions regarding military relations in 1996 and 1997 had moved on to retirement, a pattern replicated among the U.S. counterparts who were responsible for policy issues in the earliest years of the defense relationship. There were new institutional actors on both sides, including Vietnam's Military Strategy Institute and its Institute for Foreign Defense Relations. On the U.S. side of the equation, the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs was established in late 2007 to elevate what were once the responsibilities of a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense.

Both sides had become smarter about each other, better equipped to react to opportunities and determine the most effective use of resources to improve practical interaction, and more inclined to frank and straightforward dialogue. This was a relationship that was growing, flourishing, and showing promise beyond the expectations that greeted the idea of mil-to-mil normalization at the inception of this project in 1995.

However, it was not a relationship that would advance without lapses, reversals, and temporizing on the Vietnamese side of the equation. Some predictable hard problems revolved around attitudes, artifacts of war, and engrained reluctances. These suggested that pursuing initiatives in, for example, the areas of training and exercises would be difficult.

Deepening and Institutionalizing Mil-to-Mil Relations

American and Vietnamese initiatives regarding defense cooperation during the course of 2011 and 2012 were aimed at deepening strategic-level dialogue, focusing the two militaries on capability building efforts and on opportunities for service-specific activities, and expanding the boundaries of acceptable mil-to-mil engagement in gradual and measured ways aimed at meeting contemporary security challenges. Following is a list of these initiatives:

- In April 2011, NDU President Admiral Ann Rondeau visited Vietnam as a guest of the Commandant of the Vietnamese National Defense Academy. A courtesy call on Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh and a session with Vice Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh anchored the visit to important moments in the relationship, specifically Thanh's December 2009 visit to Fort McNair during which he endorsed the idea of NDU relations with the Vietnamese National Defense Academy, and Vinh's September 2010 visit to NDU during which a formal relationship was established between NDU's Institute for National Strategic Studies and

the Vietnamese Military Strategy Institute and Institute for Foreign Defense Relations.⁸

- The fourth annual U.S.–Vietnam Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue took place in Washington, D.C., in June 2011. Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs Andrew J. Shapiro and Standing Vice Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh met to share their views about bilateral and regional security issues. The two discussed measures to further strengthen cooperation on nonproliferation, counterterrorism, counternarcotics, war-era POW/MIA accounting issues, effects of dioxin and Agent Orange, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and other areas of defense and security cooperation. The two sides committed to work toward a “strategic partnership” between the two nations.
- In mid-2011, Vietnam enrolled the first People’s Army officer in the U.S. National War College. Senior Colonel Hà Thành Chung, a department head in the Vietnamese Military Science

Academy, joined the class of 2011–2012 for a year of study as an International Fellow.⁹

- In August, U.S. Navy surgeon general, Vice Admiral Adam M. Robinson Jr., and Vietnam’s military medical director Colonel Vu Quoc Binh signed a statement of intent (SOI) on military medical cooperation in Hanoi.¹⁰ The SOI committed both sides to institutionalized cooperation in military medicine through exchanges of experts and joint research.¹¹
- The Obama Administration asked Congress for \$1.1 million in foreign military financing (FMF) for Vietnam in FY 2011.¹²
- The second annual U.S.–Vietnam Defense Policy Dialogue took place in September 2011, followed by the annual planning session between the PACOM and the Vietnamese Defense Ministry.¹³

The single most important indicator of Vietnam’s willingness to expand the parameters of defense engagement with the U.S. and add strategic depth to activities that had characterized military relations

since the late 1990s, was the Defense Ministry’s response to the U.S. attempt to systematically codify activities in an MOU.

On September 20, 2011, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia and Vietnam’s Deputy Defense Minister signed an MOU for “advancing bilateral defense cooperation.”

The document identified five areas in which both sides will expand cooperation: (1) maritime security, (2) search and rescue, (3) United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO), (4) humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR), and (5) collaboration between defense universities and research institutes.

Vietnam remains committed to this agreement as well as to more specific agreements concerning expanded engagement between NDU and Vietnam’s Institute for Defense International Relations (IDIR). The agreements may be non-binding in nature, but senior Vietnamese defense officials have reiterated the enthusiasm that led the Defense Ministry to the point of agreeing to the MOUs.

During 2010 and 2011, Vietnam focused on developing a new framework for the various forms and

8. Lewis M. Stern, “National Defense University: Building Strategic Relations with Vietnam,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, No. 65 (2nd Quarter 2012), <http://www.ndu.edu/press/building-strategic-relations-with-vietnam.html> (accessed June 21, 2012). In mid-2011, the Military Strategy Institute was renamed the Institute for Defense Studies. Lt. Gen. Trần Thái Bình has been the director of the Institute since 2010.

9. Merle Pribbenow and Lewis M. Stern, “Notes on Senior Colonel Hà Thành Chung,” prepared for the National Defense University, March 24, 2011. Available from the authors upon request.

10. Greg Poling, “How Deeper U.S.–Vietnam Military Cooperation Starts with Medicine,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 18, 2011, <http://cogitasia.com/how-deeper-u-s-vietnam-mil-coop-starts-with-medicine/> (accessed June 21, 2012).

11. “U.S., Vietnam Start Military Relationship,” *Defense News*, August 1, 2011, <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=7264252> (accessed June 21, 2012).

12. The U.S. and Vietnam signed an International Military Education and Training (IMET) agreement in 2005, enabling Vietnamese officers to receive English-language training in the United States. In 2007, the U.S. modified the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) regarding Vietnam to allow licenses for trade in certain non-lethal defense items and services to Vietnam. In 2009, the U.S. provided FMF to Vietnam for the first time, in the amount of \$500,000; another \$1.35 million was requested in 2010. See Mark E. Manyin, “U.S.–Vietnam Relations in 2011: Current Issues and Implications for U.S. Policy,” Congressional Research Service, May 18, 2012, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40208.pdf> (accessed June 21, 2012).

13. In August 2010, the U.S. Department of Defense and Vietnam’s Defense Ministry held the first round of annual high-level defense talks, the defense policy dialogue.

versions of its defense and strategic relations with foreign countries, and laying out a clear notion of which relations are priorities. Crystallizing a clear picture of a new strategic taxonomy is complicated. It is transitional and subject to the influence of regional political realities, current foreign relations, recent developments in core ongoing interests, such as the South China Sea, Sino-Vietnamese relations, and Vietnam's increasing surefootedness in regional and international organizations. Even the foreign policy concepts and strategic initiatives articulated at the January 2011 National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party remained "works in progress" throughout much of the 11th Central Committee's first year of tenure.¹⁴ In other words, much remains opaque about the new terms of reference and vocabulary that were used to characterize Vietnamese discourse on foreign and defense policies and issues in 2011.

Nevertheless, in this context the Vietnamese military became more mindful of the basic demands of strategic relationships and indicated more willingness to push the U.S.–Vietnam defense relationship toward a new level of practical defense cooperation. A good indication was the way Vice Minister of Defense Nguyen Chi Vinh, during his September 2010 visit to Washington, D.C., touched on very explicit parameters for how defense relations should be structured, and how new relations should be initiated.¹⁵ He spoke of exchanges

of delegations, defense dialogue ("consultations"), participation in regional and global fora, sharing information and experiences, cooperation in training and education, and joint efforts to address humanitarian issues. Vinh also spoke of various levels of strategic engagement, including partnerships and types of more focused, specific cooperation. He alluded to the intangible requirements for bilateral and multilateral relationships (reciprocity, trust, gradually deepening cooperation, a willingness to contribute to real and practical defense development); he demonstrated his increasingly operational definitions of strategic relations and strategic dialogue; and he spoke of the emergence of strategic interaction between Vietnam and big powers in a way that suggested a much more thoughtful basis regarding the fundamentals of contemporary foreign and defense relations.

The importance given these distinctions, repeated often by Vinh during interviews conducted before and after the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM), and Vietnam's increasingly operational definitions of strategic relations and strategic dialogue suggested a much more thoughtful basis regarding the fundamentals of contemporary foreign and defense relations.

The fundamental foreign and defense policy principles have shifted slightly, and a new realism has begun to emerge. Vietnam is searching for the tools and concepts necessary to negotiate these shifts, which

have provided the basis for types of engagement in the defense realm between the U.S. and Vietnam that were not possible in the earlier years of mil-to-mil relations.¹⁶

THE FUNDAMENTAL FOREIGN AND DEFENSE POLICY PRINCIPLES HAVE SHIFTED SLIGHTLY, AND A NEW REALISM HAS BEGUN TO EMERGE. VIETNAM IS SEARCHING FOR THE TOOLS AND CONCEPTS NECESSARY TO NEGOTIATE THESE SHIFTS.

The China Variable and Strategic Choice

The effort by Hanoi to define the basis for expanded defense and security cooperation with the U.S. can partly be explained as part of a Vietnamese attempt to hedge bets in a contest with a vigorously assertive and aggressively inclined China, and encouraging economic relationships that will contribute to modernization. Hanoi sees the acceptance of the formality of a defense relationship with Washington as one way of coping with China's strategic intentions of increasing its influence in East Asia. Beijing's efforts to prevent what it portrays as Washington's "containment" of China have actually compelled Vietnam to enter into a closer relationship with the U.S., especially in the realm of defense and security.

However, that argument does not explain the residual hesitancy

14. Lewis M. Stern, "The 11th Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party: Political and Military Leadership Changes," Institute for National Strategic Studies, April 2011.

15. "Thú trưởng Bộ Quốc phòng Việt Nam thăm Hoa Kỳ" ("Vice Minister of Defense Visits Vietnam"), *Quan Doi Nhan Dan (QĐND)–Thú Năm* (People's Army newspaper), September 30, 2010, and Bo Quoc Phong, Nuoc Cong Hoa Xa Hoi Chu Nghia, *Quoc Phong Viet Nam* (Ministry of Defense, Socialist Republic of Vietnam, *Vietnam's National Defense*), Hanoi, 2009.

16. Pham Binh Minh, ed., *Dinh Huong Chien Luoc Doi Ngoai Vietnam Den 2020 (The Strategic Orientation of Vietnamese Foreign Policy Through 2020)* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia (National Government Publishing House), 2010).

that the Vietnamese feel about the reliability of the U.S. as a strategic partner. It does not explain why the Vietnamese would continue to make so much of the emotional underpinnings of their friendship with China, such as trust and mutual understanding, to the extent that their interest in bilateral defense cooperation with the U.S. comes into question. Moreover, it does not explain how the “wounds of war,” issues that did so much to complicate the initial discussions of the normalization of mil-to-mil relations in 1996 and 1999 continue to preoccupy the government of Vietnam to the point of being a potential spoiling point for advancing bilateral defense and security cooperation.

Finally, it does not explain why, in the face of Chinese belligerence over sovereignty in the South China Sea, the Vietnamese leadership is so committed to preserving the basic agreements that undergird the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, and sustain the myriad of dialogues between Beijing and Hanoi—including working-level discussions on border issues, fishing rights, maritime security, and territorial waters.

The Vietnamese do not see normalization with the U.S., nor their continued normalization with China, in zero-sum terms. They realize that engaging more with the U.S. does not necessarily entail engaging less with China. Vietnam continues to acknowledge the critical importance of an effective, friendly relationship with China, even in the midst of exacerbated concerns regarding Beijing’s efforts to make its influence felt in the region. This means that the Vietnamese will not risk damage

to their relationship with China in order to strengthen their relationship with the U.S.

For this reason, the U.S. has little to gain from portraying its interest in improved strategic relations with Vietnam as focused exclusively on the extent to which enhanced defense and security cooperation between Hanoi and Washington can impact China’s strategic calculations. Moreover, a China preoccupied with, and actively countering, the impact of U.S. links with Hanoi is not likely to be in America’s interest. There are, in fact, some within the Defense Ministry who argue forcefully on behalf of the notion that Vietnam’s primary concern should be keeping its relationship with China on an even keel, even if that means turning aside the possibility of moving quickly to another level in defense interaction with the U.S. Indeed, in late August 2011, there was reason to believe, in the course of Beijing’s attempt to strike an agreement to bilaterally manage the South China Sea issue, that China sought to elicit from Vietnam a promise to tone down aspects of the relationship with the U.S., particularly its defense dimension. At the time it seemed that Deputy Defense Minister Vinh’s reluctance to sign on to a framework agreement—in the original draft form proposed by the U.S.—could be attributed to Vietnamese interest in a public display of Chinese confidence that Hanoi and Beijing could work out their South China Sea disputes.¹⁷

Vietnam is apparently comfortable with a foreign policy that offers many options in the face of Chinese assertiveness. To Vietnamese

policymakers, plans for scaling up practical bilateral defense cooperation with the U.S., an enduring commitment to keeping the Sino-Vietnamese relationship vital, fealty to the principles of nonalignment, and Vietnamese confidence in a foreign policy that places a primacy on developing relations with a broad swath of countries across the globe, can all co-exist.

It seems that at this point much more of Vietnam’s interest in enhanced defense cooperation with the U.S. is explained by the People’s Army’s focus on modernization of the military; the rationalization of Vietnam’s defense relationships with the aim of bringing the People’s Army into the 21st century; and the extent to which the kinds of capabilities and resources that might benefit the People’s Army can be derived from a defense relationship with the U.S. that features close and practical cooperation, training opportunities, and the future prospect of sales of lethal defense articles.

VIETNAM’S NEW MILITARY LEADERSHIP APPEARS TO BE FOCUSED ON MODERNIZING, ON PURSUING SYSTEMATIC AND RATIONAL DEFENSE PROCUREMENT PLANS, AND ON RESHAPING THE VIETNAMESE ARMY TO MEET THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY.

The 11th National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in 2011 elected 19 military officials to the Central Committee, and re-elected incumbent Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh to the Politburo.

17. “China, Vietnam to Resolve Disputes by Consultation,” *China Daily*, August 29, 2011, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2011-08/29/content_13215227.htm (accessed July 2, 2012), and “Thuc chất “hai kịch bản” cho Việt Nam là gì?” (“What Is the Essence of the Two Scenarios for Vietnam?”), *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* (People’s Army newspaper), August 28, 2011, <http://www.qdnd.vn/qdndsite/vi-VN/61/43/5/5/158885/Default.aspx> (accessed June 21, 2012).

Many of the military's representatives on the Central Committee were born in the mid-1950s, and a few cut their teeth in conflict toward the end of the Vietnam War. They are of an age to have been tested as military leaders during the Sino-Vietnamese war in 1979, and Vietnam's Cambodian venture. A handful were elected to the National Assembly as provincial delegates. This new military leadership appears to be focused on modernizing, on pursuing systematic and rational defense procurement plans, and on reshaping the Vietnamese army to meet the challenges of the 21st century. That is the context in which the 2011 MOU makes most sense, as a part of the effort to find the resources necessary, and the training and equipment needed, to build new capabilities for the Vietnamese People's Army.

Expanding Defense Ties and Future Strategic Payoff

Finessing the big issues of access and arms sales, the U.S. should focus on building the prospects for strategic partnership through enhanced education and training for senior Vietnamese military staff and as much operational contact between the militaries as the traffic will bear. Education and training could contribute to a new level of professionalism in Vietnam that will facilitate ties with the U.S. Additionally, training and education could enhance military and defense establishment awareness and expertise in traditionally non-lethal areas, such as humanitarian actions, environmental awareness and protection, interstate military cooperation and coordination, search and rescue operations, emergency communications, and myriad other activities. Combined with other enhanced mil-to-mil

cooperation and assistance, the U.S. can lay the groundwork for effective strategic coordination in the future.

- In the area of general professionalization of senior military education and training, the U.S. should focus on training the People's Army in staff planning and coordination; communication and coordination in intra-governmental and interagency frameworks; roles and missions in civil and natural disasters; and cooperation, coordination, and communication with international organizations.
- To sharpen the People's Army's capacity to cooperate in international coalitions, the U.S. should focus on training opportunities in four areas: (1) logistics, services, transportation, and facilities support to international organizations and nongovernmental organizations during crises; (2) evacuation and sheltering of displaced populations during civil and natural incidents; (3) roles and missions of peacekeeping forces; and (4) roles, missions, and responsibilities of the military in international combined military efforts.
- The U.S. should urge Vietnam to become serious about developing peacekeeping and search-and-rescue capabilities, and to make use of existing U.S. programs to develop those niche capabilities. This is one area where the U.S. could move from "information sharing" in workshop contexts to command-post exercises, given Vietnam's interest in developing standards of military expertise that would make it a suitable candidate for UN peacekeeping tasks.
- The U.S. should increase training in the area of military law and justice, emphasizing instruction on the international legal framework and structure; rule of law, rights of the accused, and rights of detainees; and jurisprudence and the laws of wars and conflicts.
- The U.S. should focus primarily on delivering training packages that enhance communications and coordination in joint exercises; provide a level of awareness of the applicability of treaties, international agreements, and conventions to military undertakings; enhance joint environmental-protection operations; and that develop niche capabilities in the area of protection and rescue or recovery of personnel in maritime or aviation incidents.
- The Vietnamese People's Army needs to be equipped with skill sets for search and rescue, support of international relief, stability and peacekeeping operations, strategic communications, coordination and support of relief and humanitarian organizations, and combined operations in both civil and military situations.
- Even with the current reluctance of the Vietnamese to participate in force exercises on the ground, communication exercises and combined command-post exercises could test and refine learning objectives of the proposed training modules and areas.
- The ongoing bilateral initiatives of the Joint Personnel Accounting Command (JPAC) and its predecessor, the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory in

Hawaii, identifying remains from the Vietnam War, should be expanded. An expanded and enhanced program would act as an incentive for closer cooperation by helping Vietnam locate and identify over a quarter million of their missing personnel from the Indochina War—a major Vietnamese objective. Expanding this initiative would also enhance Vietnam’s capabilities in peacekeeping and identification of mass casualties due to natural disasters or cataclysmic accidents.

- The U.S. should carefully press the Vietnamese in the direction of using IMET for more strictly mainstream military education opportunities. The U.S. should move the use of IMET resources from the agreed areas of use—military medicine, military science and technology, and cooperation on humanitarian issues—to areas of real military training, perhaps beginning with some modest military training teams (MTTs) focused on airport safety, maintenance of armored personnel carriers, and areas that have been at the core of theoretical discussions with the Vietnamese about what might be possible in the future.
- The U.S. should continue to encourage expanded naval diplomacy. Refueling stops and PASSEX activities would enhance Vietnam’s maritime safety procedures and flyouts to U.S. Navy vessels in the vicinity. All of these are activities that would concretely indicate Vietnam’s willingness to

derive training value from activities with the U.S. military.

- The U.S. should encourage Vietnam to sign an acquisition cross-servicing agreement (ACSA), a bilateral agreement that facilitates the exchange of logistics support, supplies, and services during ship visits, exercises, training, or emergencies.
- The U.S. should work with Vietnam, within the parameters of current restrictions on lethal arms sales, to make the foreign military sales (FMS) process a tool that can ultimately enhance the strategic relationship. First, the U.S. should support Vietnam’s interest in acquiring spare parts and possible repair/restoration for UH-1 transport helicopters, followed by a similar request aimed at servicing armored personnel carriers—if, indeed, the Vietnamese remain interested in this long-standing approach to its military modernization. These limited sales could logically progress to a strengthened FMS relationship based on addressing emergent capability and equipment gaps in, for example, the maritime domain or within C2-C4ISR.¹⁸ Alternatively, depending on consultations with the Vietnamese, the U.S. should be prepared to move past refurbishing Vietnam-War-era equipment directly to developing these new capabilities. Either way, the focus on capability building could be accomplished under existing restrictions, and would enable a

focus on 21st century challenges in at least some of the areas that are singled out in the September 2011 MOU as the focal points for enhancing practical bilateral defense cooperation.

These are the types of initiatives that the U.S. Department of Defense should pursue in order to enhance bilateral military engagement, build trust, and add additional lines of operation to the existing defense cooperation relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam.

Conclusion

Over the past 15 years, Vietnam has consciously pursued a balanced and “omni-directional foreign policy.” Vietnam has been fueled by a national interest in securing the basis for a more consistent, focused, and market-driven economic development, a growing recognition fueled by the consequences of a bankrupt centralized command economy and of the need for a broader regional acceptance, global recognition, and trade and aid ties. In the process, Vietnam has become much more effective in making strategic judgments about collaborating with big powers, sustaining links with neighbors, and developing a capacity to perform as a member of numerous multilateral communities.¹⁹

This and, perhaps more important, the tangible benefits that cooperation with the U.S. military provides, has resulted in closer defense cooperation, and an opening toward ever closer strategic cooperation between the two countries. To make the most of the opening, the U.S.

18. Command and control / command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems.

19. David Koh, “Vietnam Courting Major Powers,” *Straits Times* (Singapore), November 10, 2011.

must continue to expand the value proposition of U.S.–Vietnamese cooperation and exercise patience in Vietnam’s strategic evolution.

The U.S. and Vietnam share strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific region, not least the necessity to restrain Chinese ambition east of its 12-mile territorial limits and the broader imperative to balance its dominating geopolitical rise. Much of the Vietnamese governing and military establishment, however, has yet to make up its mind about how partnership with the U.S. should factor in to achieve these interests.

As the bilateral defense relationship begins to focus on building capabilities and developing new skill sets in specialized areas—peacekeeping, environmental security, search and rescue, and regional disaster response—the two defense establishments will sooner or later have to turn their attention to defense reform, professional military education, standards of conduct, and civil-military relations. These issues will eventually have to become as much a part of the bilateral dialogue as the more management-focused efforts to keep the calendar of events in the defense relationship organized and compelling. Not merely because of the legislative requirements, end-user obligations that are explicitly a

part of IMET and FMF, but because of the trajectory the bilateral dialogue should take.

The U.S.–Vietnam relationship will benefit by developing dimensions that sustain other strategic American relationships in the region, such as with the Philippines and Thailand. In the case of both of these alliances, practical cooperation has lent itself to a much more strategic approach to developing defense establishment resources and capabilities. The U.S. relationship with Indonesia is taking on a similar, if less vigorous and less comprehensive dynamic.

Cooperation on defense reform on the scale that the U.S. has been engaged in with the Philippines for more than 10 years, of course, has its own unique historical and institutional context. This sort of cooperation is far down the road for Vietnam and the U.S. Still, it is encouraging and meaningful that both sides in the U.S.–Vietnamese relationship acknowledge that a practical partnership today could one day result in a much more encompassing effort, and that, in turn, such cooperation could entail a much closer strategic partnership.

The U.S. and Vietnam are far from a meeting of the minds on the big priorities of American access to bases

and lifting of the arms embargo on Vietnam. But playing past these issues and helping Vietnam develop in areas of military training and education is a down payment for a broad partnership with the prospect of settling these issues and many more.

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