

Thayer Consultancy
ABN # 65 648 097 123



Background Brief:

Vietnam Maintains Equidistance Between China and the United States

October 7, 2021

We are preparing a report on how Vietnam tries to balance the influence of China and the United States on its policies, particularly after Vietnam was hit hard by the fourth wave of the pandemic. Vietnam's current GDP growth is negative and this has created an uncertain environment for recovery in the short term, especially as lockdown measures on Ho Chi Minh City, a crucial economic hub, were lifted only recently on 1 October.

We request your assessment of the following issues:

Q1. Do you see any sign that the COVID pandemic has pushed Hanoi closer to Beijing's orbit? If so, why/

ANSWER: Vietnam pursues a policy of cooperation and struggle (vừa hợp tác vừa đấu tranh) with the major powers while pursuing a foreign policy of "independence, self-reliance, peace, cooperation and development." Vietnam seeks to main equidistance between the major powers, including China and the United States.

The COVID pandemic has not pushed Vietnam closer to China's orbit. Since August, Vietnam has launched a major COVID vaccine diplomatic offensive that has netted 55 million doses of vaccines from multiple sources, including China.

Q2. Vietnam's relations with China are based on a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership. Vice President Kamala Harris failed to upgrade U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relations to strategic partnership during her recent visit. Do you think the U.S. has been outsmarted by China? Why?

ANSWER: In 2013, Vietnam raised its bilateral relations with China from a strategic cooperative partnership to a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership and Vietnam also raised its relations with the United States to a comprehensive partnership. Each of these relationships has evolved over the last eight years.

China has been forced to play catch-up after the visits to Vietnam by U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Vice President Kamala Harris. China, therefore, has chosen to play the COVID card and to emphasize socialist solidarity. Vietnam is the winner because it has not compromised its independence or self-reliance.

In their meetings with Vietnam's leaders, both Austin and Harris proposed talks on raising bilateral relations to a strategic partnership. Vietnam's leaders did not reject these proposals. Marx Knapper, the U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam-designate, stated in

his Senate confirmation hearings, that he would give priority to raising bilateral relations to a strategic partnership.

Vietnam's policy of "cooperation and struggle" means that Hanoi has continued to cooperate with China in many areas despite their maritime disputes in the South China Sea. On 10 September, Vietnam and China held the thirteenth meeting of the Steering Committee for Bilateral Cooperation. Just prior to the meeting, State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced that China will donate an additional three million Covid-19 vaccine doses to Vietnam. At the Steering Committee meeting both sides agreed to "increase experience sharing in COVID-19 prevention and control, including cooperation in vaccines..."

Q3. Many argue, the COVID-19 pandemic has helped China to boost its presence not only in Vietnam but in the region including in Cambodia, and Laos, do you think China's growing presence will essentially affect US' ASEAN/Indo-pacific policy?

ANSWER: China established its presence and influence in Laos and Cambodia long before the COVID-19 pandemic emerged. China's presence and influence was based on the growth of its economy and China's willingness to finance needed infrastructure under Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative.

The United States' Indo-Pacific policy has already been affected by the COVID pandemic as a separate but intertwined issue with China's growing assertiveness. This was emphasized by the Biden Administration's *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* issued in March 2021 that stated, "America's fate is inextricably linked to events beyond our shores. We confront a global pandemic... We face... growing rivalry with China..."

The first virtual meeting of the Quad gave priority to the production of COVID vaccines in India, to be funded by the U.S. and Japan, and transported to Indo-Pacific countries by Australia. This priority was reaffirmed at the first face-to-face meeting of Quad leaders. As U.S. officials constantly emphasize, COVID vaccines are being donated without cost or strings attached. Both meetings of Quad leaders emphasized their support for ASEAN centrality.

Suggested citation: Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnam Maintains Equidistance Between China and the United States" *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, October 7, 2021. All background briefs are posted on Scribd.com (search for Thayer). To remove yourself from the mailing list type, UNSUBSCRIBE in the Subject heading and hit the Reply key.

Thayer Consultancy provides political analysis of current regional security issues and other research support to selected clients. Thayer Consultancy was officially registered as a small business in Australia in 2002.