

Vietnam's Growing Strategic Partnerships with European Countries

European partnerships form an increasingly important part of Vietnam's omnidirectional foreign policy.

By Hai Hong Nguyen

Since launching the Doi Moi (or “renewal”) reforms in the late 1980s, Vietnam's ruling Communist Party has significantly expanded the scope of its foreign relations. As of December 2021, Vietnam had established diplomatic ties with 189 countries: of which it has a “special relationship” with three countries; a “strategic partnership” with 17 countries; a “comprehensive partnership” with 13 countries. Of the 17 strategic partnerships, five are with European countries, including Spain, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Italy. Except for the U.K., the other four remain members of the European Union (EU). Their EU membership has both pros and cons for Vietnam's relations with the bloc, but the advantages have generally outweighed the disadvantages.

Vietnam usually establishes a strategic partnership with another country after implementing a comprehensive partnership. However, Vietnam elevated its conventional friendships with all the five European countries to a strategic partnership without taking this intermedia step. The rationale for Vietnam's decision for doing so is unknown, but Vietnam conceives of strategic partnerships as a framework through which cooperation is enhanced with shared interests to build strategic trust. Two major areas of cooperation underline the strategic partnership between Vietnam and these countries. The first is political and diplomatic cooperation, and the second is defense and security cooperation. It should be noted that the scope of a strategic partnership is not limited to these two areas, but instead “comprehensively” embraces all areas of cooperation including economics, education, science and technology, and culture.

Political and Diplomatic Cooperation

In Vietnam's strategic partnerships with these countries, political and diplomatic cooperation has taken priority. The scope of cooperation in this area is typically characterized by the regular exchange of high-level official visits, the establishment of bilateral cooperation mechanisms, mutual support in international and multilateral forums, and shared strategic interests.

One statement that appears in the joint statements establishing a strategic partnership between Vietnam and Spain in 2009, the United Kingdom in 2010, Germany in 2011, France in 2013, and Italy in 2013 refers to the two sides' agreement “to advance the exchange of visits by high-level official delegations” as well as to arrange talks and meetings on the sidelines of regional and international forums. While “high-level official visits” can be broadly defined, they usually refer to top-level government officials. Among the five European strategic partners, Vietnam in the past 10 years has had the greatest number of bilateral high-level official visits with France. Out of the 16 visits, Vietnam has made ten, including a visit by the Secretary-General of the Vietnamese Communist Party (in 2018), three visits by the Prime Minister (in 2013, 2015, and 2021), and a visit by the chairperson of the National Assembly (in 2019).

France's president and prime minister also visited Vietnam, in 2016 and 2018, respectively. The frequency of the two-way high-level visits between Vietnam and France can be explained on the ground of a "shared history of war and peace, of estrangement and reunions" and "special standards profoundly bound by history."

The strategic partnerships have led to the establishment of bilateral cooperation mechanisms, which act as advisory and coordination channels to promote the execution of agreements in mutually agreed strategic areas. These mechanisms vary, taking the form of an inter-governmental committee (with Spain), joint committees (with Germany, Italy, France, and the U.K.), political consultations (with Germany, Italy, and Spain), strategic dialogues (with the U.K., Germany, and France), and a strategic steering group (with Germany). They are often led and coordinated by Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, becoming an effective channel to maintain diplomatic contacts between the two sides.

Vietnam's foreign policy in the post-Doi Moi era is not only to deepen its bilateral relations with other nations but also to increase its presence and engagement in regional, international, multilateral, and world-level institutions and mechanisms, as well as multilateral free trade agreements. Engaging in these mechanisms has allowed Vietnam to knit a web of interwoven interests with other countries at both bilateral and multilateral levels, bringing in economic gains and enabling it to leverage these mechanisms to secure its strategic interests.

Vietnam's strategic partnerships with these five European countries have smoothed its expansion of cooperation with the EU in multiple areas, from economics to defense and security. The conclusion of the European Union-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA), which was then approved by the European Parliament, would not have happened without the endorsement of these five key strategic partners, given that there were voices within the European Parliament who protested Vietnam's human rights records. Vietnam also received support from these countries during its election as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council for a two-year term in 2020-2021. In return, Vietnam has constantly encouraged the five European strategic partners to engage and cooperate with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and to join regional free trade agreements such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership, in the case of the U.K. In bilateral talks, leaders of the two sides have always called on support from the other side within international forums.

Vietnam and the five European countries share strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region. The U.K., Germany, France, and the EU have all adopted Indo-Pacific strategies, which emphasize the building of an international rules-based order in the region and the importance of freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea, a maritime route that is important to Europe's economy. Vietnam and these strategic partners have agreed that all disputes in the South China Sea, where China's perceived aggressive and bullying actions have been criticized, must be solved through peaceful means according to the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and full and effective implementation of the Declaration of Conduct of the parties in the South China Sea agreed in 2002. The five European countries' support of Vietnam's approach to dealing with disputes in the South China Sea has consolidated the strategic trust between the two sides.

Defense and Security Cooperation

In diplomatic ties, defense and security cooperation tend to grow with increased political and strategic trust. Among the five strategic European partners, Vietnam's defense and security

cooperation with Germany is one step behind the other four nations. A possible mechanism for the strategic exchange of experience in defense and security policy was considered, but actual cooperation was not defined as a priority when Vietnam and Germany established their strategic partnership, even though the two sides signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in 2004 with a focus on German military personnel training Vietnamese troops. Defense and security only became a priority for German-Vietnamese relations in the new Strategic Action Plan for 2019-2022.

Vietnam has also signed an MoU on defense cooperation with Spain (2010), the U.K. (2011), and Italy (2013). The MoUs have led to defense policy dialogues (with Italy and the U.K.) and a program to train pilots and sales of marine patrol aircraft to Vietnam (with Spain). In 2017, Vietnam and the U.K. signed a new MoU on defense cooperation, which underpinned potential defense industry cooperation. Vietnam has purchased warships from Italy (2019), the U.K. (2018, 2020), Germany (2022), and France (2018, 2021, 2022).

Of its various European strategic partners, Vietnam's defense relations are most advanced with France. In 2009, the two countries' defense ministries signed an MoU that laid the foundation for the establishment of a Joint Committee on Defense Cooperation (JCDC), which was set to meet annually to boost defense cooperation. The first meeting of JCDC was held in Hanoi in 2010. During a visit of the French defense minister to Vietnam in 2010, the two countries upgraded their defense ties to a strategic partnership in defense cooperation. In 2018, the French and Vietnamese defense ministers signed a Declaration on Joint Vision of Defense Cooperation 2018-2028 and made it a pillar of the strategic partnership. The First Vietnam-France strategic and defense cooperation dialogue was held in Paris in 2018.

Vietnam's enhanced defense and security cooperation with these five European strategic partners is consistent with the country's overall defense policy. The 2019 National Defense White Paper emphasizes that Vietnam will seek cooperation with strategic partners as part of the country's national defense strategy, which aims at "safeguarding the Homeland and being ready to defeat any forms of wars of foreign invasion." It has been argued that Vietnam's "four noes" defense policy – "no military alliances," "no aligning with one country against another," "no foreign military bases on Vietnamese soil," and "no use of, or threat to use, force in international relations," – does not apply to defense cooperation with these five European strategic partners and others that are aimed at increasing Vietnam's defense capabilities. Indeed, increased cooperation with these European countries gives Vietnam more confidence in defending its claims of sovereignty in the South China Sea.

More Strategic Engagement?

Vietnam's strategic partnerships with the five European countries have continued to grow over the past two years, despite the complications of COVID-19. The EVFTA (which came into effect on August 1, 2020) and the U.K.-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement, which entered into force on January 1, 2021, are the two new momentous agreements that further deepen Vietnam's strategic partnerships with the five countries through both bilateral and multilateral channels. In 2021, three of the top four Vietnamese leaders, including the president, prime minister, and chairperson of the National Assembly, paid visits to Europe or held telephone talks with their counterparts in France, the U.K., and Germany.

The recent adoption of Indo-Pacific strategies by the EU, Germany, the U.K., and France have signaled their strategic pivot to the region. Vietnam's geopolitical position makes it a

natural strategic partner for the EU and the five European countries that intend to engage more deeply in the region.

The relationship could soon be set to deepen further. Russia, Hanoi's single largest source of arms, has faced tough Western sanctions since its invasion of Ukraine. These sanctions will have a great impact on Russia's weapon exports to Vietnam in the long term. They could also make Vietnam rethink its overdependence on Russian weapons and enhance its defense industry cooperation with their European strategic partners. Both Vietnam and the five European strategic partners should consider the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an opportunity to fortify rather than hinder their strategic engagement, especially in defense and security cooperation.

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