

Vietnam's Bilateral Defense Diplomacy with Major Powers*

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The paper explores the development of Vietnam's bilateral defense diplomacy with world and regional powers including the United States, India, and Japan, with a particular focus on the period from 2009 to 2018. The paper finds that Vietnam's multidirectional defense diplomacy is fundamentally shaped by its historical experience, the contemporary shift in the balance of power and the strategic challenges caused by China's emerging power. By pursuing a multi-polar balance among major partners, Vietnam avoids being pulled into their rivalry, and keeps its non-alignment as well as strategic autonomy. The international defense cooperation has become further deepened and more substantive to satisfy Vietnam's strategic interests including national security, territorial integrity, economic development and regime legitimacy. However, domestic and geo-strategic constraints, and asymmetrical economic interdependence with China lead this paper to suppose further challenges in the future of Vietnam's defense diplomacy.

Keywords: defense diplomacy, national interest, Vietnam's foreign policy, South China Sea

Introduction¹

During the Cold War, defense² diplomacy, more commonly referred to as military aid or defense cooperation, was employed by competing countries for longstanding realpolitik roles of intensifying the military capabilities of friends and allies, deterring common enemies, security of friendly regimes, creating and maintaining a sphere of influence.³ Recently, governments around the world have broadened the scope of defense diplomacy

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to include wider foreign policy and security goals such as preserving peace and stability, promoting common security, addressing transnational threats and non-traditional security issues.⁴ Even so, the application of defense diplomacy in both peaceful and coercive ways mostly aims at pursuing narrowly defined national interests. This shows that the new form of defense diplomacy is always in coexistence with the old one.

Vietnam's increasing military interaction with major powers in the world is a notable example of using defense diplomacy for maintaining peaceful coexistence in the region, thereby securing national interests of security, territorial integrity and regime legitimacy. Its National Defense White Paper (DWP) released in 2009 refers to defense diplomacy as a crucial part of multidirectional and diversified diplomacy with the purposes of establishing and expanding security and military relations with all countries.⁵ Being a critical part of the state's diplomacy, defense diplomacy aims to actively contribute to "ensuring a peaceful and stable environment" and promoting regional cooperation.⁶ This decision was affirmed by the Resolution of the 11th National Party Congress (2011) that considered a proactive, active, and deep integration into the world as one of the major priorities for enhancing its national defense capacity. Recently, the Vietnamese People's Army (VPA) has built defense cooperation with over 80 armed forces and participated in multilateral security mechanisms. Among them, the United States, India, and Japan denote the major powers that Vietnam is most concerned with, so their defense and security cooperation has been strengthened dramatically. In this paper, these countries are selected for studying due to the fact that they have shared concerns about China's growing military and economic power, and increased military footprint in the East and South China Seas.⁷ Since 2009, a strategic competition for expanding the sphere of influence created by these global and regional powers has been observed in the region, with the U.S. strategy of "pivoting" or "rebalancing" toward the Asia-Pacific, Japan's increasing efforts to enhance its political role and image in Asia, and India's Act East policy under the Modi administration.⁸

This paper deals with the following questions: What factors have driven and enabled Vietnam's recent promotion of comprehensive defense diplomacy with major powers? What are the constraints for Vietnam in fostering its defense diplomacy? By providing answers to these questions, this paper contributes to literature concerning Vietnam's defense policy when facing (non)-traditional security challenges in the post-Cold War period. The paper is structured as follows. The first part provides the definition of "defense diplomacy" as it has strongly emerged since the 1990s through outlining its own aspects and components. The article then goes on to discuss in detail Vietnam's perspectives and operationalization of defense diplomacy based on examining official documents and data released by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and Vietnamese Ministry of National Defense. Various aspects of Vietnam's defense diplomacy including the holding of annual defense and security consultations, educational exchanges, combined exercises, arms sale and military aid, foreign naval presence and ship visits are examined. The third part is dedicated to discussing significant limitations and constraints that Vietnam has faced in promoting defense diplomacy.

The author argues that the adoption of defense diplomacy with these major powers as

the critical component of Vietnam's international integration strategy has been a rational choice given its own historical experiences, new perceptions of security and national interests, concerns over regime security and strategy for the balance of power.⁹ Vietnam seeks to use defense diplomacy as a "soft balance" which aims to maintain its strategic autonomy and improve its self-confidence in the face of security challenges caused by the growing power of the "Northern Giant"—China. By doing so, it further deepens its security ties with major powers not only to deal with the traditional security issues of sovereignty over the South China Sea,¹⁰ but also to maintain its economic development and regime security. However, this is likely to be implemented at a gradual pace given domestic political pressures, and asymmetrical economic interdependence with China.

A Modern Concept of Defense Diplomacy

In international security studies, scholars traditionally focus on studying the coercive nature of defense diplomacy which implies the use of military force or assistance to achieve policy goals at odds with opponents, whether for purposes of defense, deterrence, compellence or intervention.¹¹ According to Storey, in the Post-Cold War era, many of the same kinds of activities undertaken during the Cold War, including the posting of defense attachés overseas, the regular exchange of civilian and uniformed delegations, naval ship and military aircraft visits, combined training and exercises, educational programs for foreign military officers, capacity-building support and arms sales, and bilateral or multilateral defense cooperation agreements and treaties, are still maintained in the framework of contemporary defense diplomacy.¹² However, recently, one of its primary objectives is not only to fulfill a long-lasting *realpolitik* role of supporting the armed forces and security of allies,¹³ but also to provide a low-cost, low-risk "continuation of dialogue by other means" and to further reduce the possibility of conflict.¹⁴ In doing so, the new defense diplomacy aims to promote trust and constructive relationships among states via dialogues and exchanges of military organizations for achieving national interests, conflict prevention and stable international security.¹⁵ In other words, the scope of defense diplomacy has been expanded to include broader foreign policy and security objectives such as preserving peace and stability, promoting common security, and resolving transnational or non-traditional threats. Thus, scholars call for a differentiation between the old and new forms of defense diplomacy. According to Cottey and Foster, the old defense diplomacy is traditionally used as a means of countering enemies while the new one focuses on strategic engagement with potential enemies, support for democracy, and enabling states to address their own security problems.¹⁶ Muthana concisely defines defense diplomacy as the peaceful use of military capabilities as a tool of national foreign policy.¹⁷ Similarly, Anton Du Plessis describes modern defense diplomacy as "the use of armed forces in operations other than war, building on their trained experience and discipline to achieve national and foreign objectives abroad."¹⁸ In the contemporary global and regional strategic engagement, new areas of defense diplomacy have thus been identified including interstate conflict

prevention, security-sector reform advancement in foreign militaries, fight against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and contribution to Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) and peacekeeping operations. These new areas of defense diplomacy are to create “sustainable cooperative relationships, thereby building trust and facilitating conflict prevention; introducing transparency into defense relations; building and reinforcing perceptions of common interests; changing the mindset of partners; and introducing cooperation in other areas.”¹⁹

The modern form of defense diplomacy includes a wide range of activities conducted and implemented mainly by armed forces, their defense ministries, and other state institutions, whose actions are based on the use of positive incentives and deliberative tools.²⁰ Practically, it suggests that, besides maintaining the traditional role as an instrument for the use of force, militaries and defense ministries also aim to promote cooperative engagement among states. In this regard, various activities conducted by these actors including conclusion of defense cooperation agreements, exchanges of defense officers, dialogues on security concerns and solutions, naval visits, military training and education, provision of military assistance, and joint military exercises have all been represented as practices of defense diplomacy.²¹

Vietnam’s Application of Modern Defense Diplomacy

The term of defense diplomacy was not indeed featured in the CPV’s Resolutions, nor was it officially adopted by DWPs until 2009. The first and second DWP released in 1998 and 2004, entitled “Consolidating National Defense Safeguarding the Homeland” and “National Defense in the Early Years of the 21st Century,” respectively, affirmed that peace and self-defense are at the core of Vietnam’s national defense. Regarding military alliances, the 2004 DWP stated: “Vietnam consistently advocates neither joining military alliances nor giving any foreign countries permission to have military bases in Vietnam.”²² The third, and most recent, DWP entitled “Vietnam National Defense” was published in 2009. This DWP, for the first time, identified new threats to national security including non-traditional security challenges and territorial disputes, thereby calling for more bilateral and multilateral defense cooperation. Its chapter on national defense policy is composed of two sections: “Fundamental Issues of the National Defense Policy”; and “Military Diplomacy and Security Cooperation.” This demonstrates that Vietnam attaches high value to military diplomacy in national defense policy. The 2009 DWP indicates that, although Vietnam reaffirmed neither joining any military alliances, nor allowing any other countries to build military bases in the country, Vietnam is concerned with increasing defense cooperation with countries that respect mutual interests, independence, sovereignty and development.²³ Because “defense cooperation is one of the most important factors for maintaining peace and stability in the region and around the world, it is also an important factor for achieving Vietnam’s defense goals.”²⁴ Consequently, building a strong-armed force for self-defense and deterrence, resolving differences and disputes by peaceful means based on international laws and norms,

and strengthening defense diplomacy and international defense cooperation are major guiding principles of Vietnam's defense policy.²⁵ The Vietnamese Ministry of National Defense defines defense diplomacy as "exchanges of military delegations at all levels, defense consultancy and dialogue, cooperation in training and education, participation in regional and international fora to reinforce the friendship, mutual understanding, confidence building, and conflict prevention."²⁶

The 11th Party Congress (2011) marks another important shift in the Party's external relation thinking when requiring the proactive and active comprehensive integration in all spheres of economy, politics, defense, culture, education, etc. This is the first time that the Party has officially mentioned defense diplomacy in the Central Resolution. In January 2016, Vietnam's Cabinet approved the "Overall Strategy for International Integration Through 2020, Vision to 2030" affirming that Vietnam must make greater efforts to intensify defense and security relations with strategic and comprehensive partners.²⁷ By doing so, the Government of Vietnam (GoV) applies the modern concept of defense diplomacy which bears a multidirectional approach aiming for independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and other national interests.²⁸

Vietnam has been more proactive in its defense diplomacy since the late 2000s, for main reasons. The first dynamic is originated from its historical mistakes in making the foreign policies toward great powers and forming "alliances" based on ideology-based rationales of alignment during the Cold War.²⁹ Before Doi Moi, Vietnam's defense cooperation was driven by mostly ideological and geostrategic imperatives. Vietnam received a massive amount of military assistance including money, training, advisors, and equipment from the Communist bloc, particularly China and the Soviet Union. However, during the late 1960s and 1970s when there were a split and armed conflicts between the Soviet Union and China, Hanoi faced a deep dilemma and, increasingly, could not maintain the fine balance of power pursued during the 1950s and early 1960s. Hanoi's growing dependence on the Soviet Union, particularly its military alliance established with Soviet Union by the 1978 Friendship and Cooperation Agreement, caused tense relations with China, the United States, and ASEAN countries. China's subsequent invasion of Vietnam and the Cambodian conflict further isolated Vietnam from the international community in the 1980s and early 1990s. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union did nothing to support Vietnam when there was a military clash between Chinese and Vietnamese naval vessels on reefs in the Spratlys during 1987–1988³⁰. Given costly experiences of being a victim of great power contention in history, Vietnam is certainly distrustful of alliance politics allegedly built to counter China or any powers.³¹ Consequently, Hanoi understands that the best way to maintain its independence, autonomy and to maximize its strategic space to maneuver is not to ally with or over-depend on any country.³²

Second, Hanoi has introduced new perceptions of security threats and national interests which constitute agential causes determining the new defense diplomacy with major powers.³³ The DWPs released in 2004 and 2009 highlight "diversified and complicated security challenges" for Vietnam in the post-Cold War period including economic weakness, regime security, territorial sovereignty, and non-traditional security

issues.³⁴ CPV recently refers to disputes on territory, sea and islands as salient challenges and threats for Vietnam's foreign relations and development in the Party Resolutions.³⁵ Among them, Vietnam sees the territorial dispute over the South China Sea as one of its most serious national security challenges³⁶ due to rising tensions between claimant countries and Chinese assertive behaviors in this sea. Geography places Vietnam at a crossroads of maritime network in the South China Sea, thereby being a strategic communication point for safeguarding and controlling maritime transportation. In Hanoi's view, disputes over the South China Sea affect many aspects of national security and development such as sovereignty and territorial integrity, maritime economic development, regional peace and stability, the regime legitimacy and domestic stability.³⁷ Consequently, the recent priority of the CPV in foreign relations is to maintain a peaceful and stable environment, to protect national independence and sovereignty, and to enhance the country's position in the international arena, thereby reinforcing the regime security and the CPV's legitimacy in the period of Doi Moi. Bearing this in mind, the 2009 DWP refers to "the maintenance of peaceful and stable environment for socio-economic development, industrialization and modernization, building the socialism-oriented market economy as [...] the consistent goal of its national defense policy".³⁸ To this end, Vietnam has diversified and multilateralized external relations to "become a friend to all countries in the world community" and to implement the motto of "more friends, fewer enemies."³⁹ According to the CPV, multilateralization and diversification of external relations are to connect the interests of all powers in the country, and to avoid the scenarios of overly relying on any particular power, thereby safeguarding its independence of actions and political autonomy.⁴⁰

Third, the Vietnamese government is seeking to intensify military contacts and security cooperation with other powers in an attempt to implement a hedging strategy towards China. Many scholars argue that, since the normalization of both countries in 1991, Vietnam has always adopted hedging as a key strategy towards China that is constituted, on the one hand, by measures to foster economic engagement between the two countries and deepen party-to-party relations. At the same time, Vietnam seeks to diversify its economic and defense partners to increase Hanoi's leverage power, reduce its over-dependence on the Chinese market, and provide a "safety net" in the face of Chinese aggression.⁴¹ The Sino-Vietnamese relationship has been normalized for nearly three decades and is likely to remain so, however, it is certainly an asymmetric relationship.⁴²

The final factor shaping the Vietnamese pursuit of new defense diplomacy initiative has been attributed to its concerns over regime security emerged during outbreaks of nationalist sentiment.⁴³ According to many scholars, patriotism and nationalism nurtured through the successful mobilization of national resistance war against foreign invaders have worked as pillars of the CPV's authority, thereby strengthening or weakening regime security.⁴⁴ However, strong public concerns over China's involvement in bauxite mining and escalating assertiveness against Vietnam in the South China Sea have triggered anti-Chinese nationalism, constituting serious threats to the Party leadership in the post-Cold War era.⁴⁵ The number of anti-Chinese protests in the Vietnamese

community has increased dramatically, which reflects Beijing's growing incredibility and unpopularity regardless of the ideological affinity. According to the public opinion poll made by the Pew Research Center in July 2014, Vietnam (74 percent) saw China as the greatest danger to the nation and 84 percent of Vietnamese worried that territorial disputes with China could lead to military conflict.⁴⁶ In July 28, 2014, 61 leading Vietnamese intellectuals and party members even signed an open letter calling for harder solutions in dealing with Beijing, international legal action and a reduction of Vietnam's dependence on China by "escaping China's orbit" (*thoát Trung*).⁴⁷ Domestic political pressure forces the Vietnamese government to cope with the most challenging question of "how to preserve its sovereignty and political autonomy while maintaining stable, peaceful and beneficial relationships with powerful neighboring China."⁴⁸ Armed conflicts with any state, especially Southeast Asian countries or China will probably threaten the foreign policy objectives of "maintaining a peaceful environment and creating favorable external conditions" for economic development, national industrialization and modernization which have been continuously mentioned in Political Resolutions released in all National Party Congresses since 1986.⁴⁹

Faced with this new context, Vietnam's adoption of multidirectional defense diplomacy aims to establish military and security cooperation with global or regional powers that can increase reliable security assistance and protection.⁵⁰ Defense diplomacy has thereby actively contributed to balancing the influence of great powers on Vietnam, enhancing its self-confidence and autonomy in resolving territorial disputes, and "maintaining a peaceful and stable external environment." Practically, Vietnam's deputy defense minister Nguyen Chi Vinh affirmed that, "Military diplomacy, through the combination of national defense and diplomacy, contributes to national territorial sovereignty and integrated defense, and is a priority strategy for safeguarding the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the fatherland to ensure that war does not break out."⁵¹

Operationalizing Defense Diplomacy

Conclusion of Bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreements

Since 2009, Vietnam has negotiated and concluded many bilateral agreements defining the scope and forms of defense ties with these global and regional powers. The United States and Vietnam have formalized and defined areas and forms of bilateral military cooperation by signing a MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) on Advancing Bilateral Defense Cooperation in 2011, and Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations in 2015. In 2011, Vietnam and Japan concluded a MOU on Bilateral Defense Cooperation and Exchange outlining a wide range of defense cooperation activities such as consultations and exchanges of defense officers, port calls, maritime cooperation, UN peacekeeping training, cooperation in non-traditional security issues, personnel training, etc. The Japan–Vietnam "Extensive Strategic Partnership" for Peace and Prosperity in

Asia was signed in a 2014 joint statement by President Truong Tan Sang and Prime Minister (PM) Shinzo Abe, which upgraded the strategic partnership in all fields including maritime security relations and defense industry. In particular, two defense ministries have further deepened this Strategic Partnership by signing the Joint Vision Statement on Japan–Vietnam defense cooperation towards the next decade in April 2018. In these documents, the two sides have pledged to strengthen defense ties and maritime cooperation, to increase mutual supports in maintaining marine security and regional stability.

A Memorandum on Defense Cooperation (2007), and Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations (2015) concluded with India provide comprehensive cooperation activities including the exchange of high–level visits, annual security dialogue, service–to–service interaction, port calls, military training and capacity building, defense equipment procurement and related transfer of technology, joint exercises in non-traditional security areas (humanitarian assistance/disaster relief, search and rescue), and cooperation at regional fora such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus.

Defense Attachés, Defense Officer Exchanges, and Security Dialogues

A defense attaché plays an important role in promoting defense cooperation, articulating each country’s defense policy, collecting information on the partner’s political and security issues, managing security assistance programs, and arranging to escort visiting delegations.⁵² Vietnam regards these military agencies as an “important channel for sharing information on defense–security issues.”⁵³ While India founded its military office in Hanoi in 1985, those of the United States and Japan were established in 1996 and 2011, respectively. Recently, Vietnam has established defense attaché offices in 34 countries, and 45 countries have founded their defense attaché offices in the country.⁵⁴

A number of mechanisms for bilateral defense consultations have been established with the United States, Japan and India (see Table 1). In June 2008, the United States and Vietnam held the first round of deputy ministers’ dialogue on politics, security and defense in Hanoi, covering wide–ranging issues in security cooperation under their respective foreign ministries. The dialogue has since taken place annually in either Washington or Hanoi, becoming the first high-level political and security dialogue mechanism between the two countries. The regularization of Vietnam–Japan high-level strategic dialogues has been supplemented with a series of defense policy dialogues.⁵⁵ Since 2012, an annual Strategic Partnership Dialogue at the deputy defense minister level between Japan and Vietnam has been organized in either Tokyo or Hanoi to “discuss comprehensively political, diplomatic, defense and security matters.”⁵⁶ Until 2018, there have been twelve Vietnam–Indian Security Dialogues organized at the Defense Secretary level.

Besides, Vietnam and these states have exchanged high-level delegations. These visits have been led by defense ministers, service chiefs, and general staff. Since 2009, Vietnam’s high-ranking military officers have made a series of official visits to the United States such as Chief of General Staff, Sr. Lt. General Do Ba Ty (June 2013),

defense minister (General) Ngo Xuan Lich (2017), deputy defense minister Sr. Lt. General Nguyen Chi Vinh (2017), etc. The U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey, Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus, and Defense Secretary Ashton Carter visited Vietnam in 2014 and 2015, respectively. Leon Panetta became the first U.S. Secretary of Defense to visit Cam Ranh Bay—the former American military base—since the end of the Vietnam War, which demonstrated the greater importance of security cooperation for both countries. In his address on the Richard Byrd, anchored at Cam Ranh Bay, he said: “Access for U.S. naval ships into this facility is a key component of this relationship and we see a tremendous potential here.”⁵⁷

Since the establishment of the Japan–Vietnam “strategic partnership” in 2009, Japan’s top-ranking political leaders including the PM, foreign ministers, and defense ministers have met individually with their Vietnamese counterparts at least 23 times combined.⁵⁸ Although the content of exchanges and cooperation in defense were not mentioned clearly in the 2009 declaration of the “strategic partnership,”⁵⁹ an October 2011 Memorandum publicly highlighted high-ranking defense officer exchanges and reciprocal naval visits in the framework of defense cooperation between the two sides. In October 2011, Vietnamese Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh made an official visit to Japan, holding talks with Japanese counterparts which led to the conclusion of a MOU on Japan–Vietnam defense cooperation and exchanges. During the visit of Japanese Minister of Defense Onodera to Vietnam in September 2013, the two countries confirmed to proactively foster wide-ranging security and defense cooperation areas, including ship visits, working-level dialogues, supports for Vietnam’s first contribution to UN peacekeeping operations. Also, he was the first Japanese defense minister to visit the military base on Cam Ranh Bay which is at a critical choke point of the South China Sea. He answered reporters that he expected “[...] that the cooperative relationship between Vietnam and Japan, which includes military-related interactions beyond the boundary of Cam Ranh Bay, will strengthen.”⁶⁰

A Memorandum on Defense Cooperation (2009) and Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations (2015) signed with India have led to reciprocal visits of dignitaries taking place frequently (see Table 1). India’s Defense Ministers visited Vietnam in October 2010, June 2016, June 2018, etc. The visit of Vietnamese minister of national defense to India was made in November 2009, and May 2015, December 2016. Vietnam hosted the visits by India’s Chief of Army Staff in February 2008 and July 2010. Vietnam’s Chief of Navy and head of Coast Guard visited India in 2011 and September 2013.

Defense Education and Research

Training courses and joint research programs for military officers cover a wide range of subjects including language, functional and technical training, and other academic programs at military colleges, institutions and universities. This activity facilitates military knowledge sharing and an exchange of perspectives on regional and international security affairs, fosters mutual understanding, creates formal and informal

professional networks that can be vital in resolving conflicts.⁶¹ Defense officers, who are given the opportunity to study or research abroad, not only gain knowledge but also work as a channel or bridge for strategically engaging foreign counterparts. In the case of Vietnam, military education and research supported by developed countries also work for building self-confidence and military capability. The Armed Forces of the United States, India and Japan have been engaged with capacity building of the VPA, particularly the Navy, the Vietnam Coast Guard, and the newly established Vietnam Fisheries Resources Surveillance. The areas of focus have been professional training for Air Force pilots and crews, repairs and maintenance support, and study tour. For instance, the Indian Navy has trained around 500 Vietnamese sailors in undersea warfare doctrine and tactics at its *INS Satavahana* submarine center; its Air Force has provided pilot conversion training for the Vietnamese Air Force.⁶² In March 2016, twenty Vietnamese military officers and forty submariners participated in the six-month basic submarine course at the *INS Satavahana* center. India has also offered financial support to build the Information Technology and Foreign Languages Centre at the Signal Officers Training School in Nha Trang, establishing a military information technology software park for the Vietnamese military. Since the signing of the MOU on Defense Cooperation by the two defense ministers in November 2009, India has been offering 50 ITEC (Indian Technical & Economic Cooperation Programme) slots per year to Vietnamese defense personnel. In the framework of annual exchange programs, Vietnamese young military officers visit and study at many Indian military schools, army units such as National Defence Academy, Mechanized Infantry Training Center, Armored Warfare School, etc. During the naval visits in Vietnam, Indian officers and crew members take part in training for Vietnamese soldiers, and joint search and rescue exercises at sea. In 2011, some officers and students of Nha Trang Naval Academy participated in training sessions and professional exchanges aboard with the *INS Airavat* ship during its trip to the port cities of Nha Trang and Hai Phong.

Personnel of Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) and Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) have given a series of short-term seminars on underwater medicine and flight safety to Vietnamese counterparts since 2012. Officers of the Vietnamese armed forces were also invited to Japan to observe and join the medical training at JMSDF (September 2013), the Northeastern Army's training course on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations (February 2014) and JASDF's training on flight safety (March 2014). In 2016, on the visit of Cam Ranh International Port, the JMSDF held training exercises on humanitarian and medical aid, and search and rescue missions.

Vietnam military officers have been sent to study and train in the U.S. with the support of the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program—a key part of the U.S. Security Cooperation Program. U.S. military assistance also includes English language training for military officers, training activities for UN peacekeeping operations, etc. In 2015, four English language courses for around 70 VPA officers sponsored by the U.S. Department of Defense were organized in Hanoi. In the same year, VPA sent the first military pilot to the United States for training under the U.S. Aviation Leadership Program. In August 2010, the *USS John McCain* trained Vietnamese forces

in the South China Sea in search and rescue. Vietnamese Navy officers made a visit to U.S. Patrol Squadron 47 in Hawaii and inspected a P-3C Orion to understand its capability in 2016. A training and auditorium building, and a set of equipment, financed by the U.S. Government, were handed over to the Vietnam Peacekeeping Center (VPC) on August 28, 2017. In September 2017, this VPC, U.S. Consulate General and Military Hospital 175 co-organized a practical training for Vietnamese military doctors who will be sent to the UN peacekeeping missions in South Sudan.

Bilateral Military Exercises for Training Purposes

Joint military exercises for training purposes is a new aspect emerging in Vietnam's defense diplomacy. The military exercises have so far focused on nontraditional security threats and HADR while those in more conventional areas have been more contentious. Non-combat exercises between the navies and air forces of the United States and Vietnam have been organized annually in recent years, concentrating on military medicine, search and rescue, and shipboard damage control.⁶³ In September 2009, the 13th Air Force Division of the United States Pacific Command made the first trip to Vietnam after the end of Vietnam War, and cooperated with the VPA to organize the two armies' first joint exercise on search and rescue calling the mission "Operation Pacific Angel." In August 2010, the *USS John McCain* engaged in military rehearsals in the South China Sea which was a sign for heightened military ties with the United States. Numerous American naval ships, including the guided missile destroyer *Howard* and *Chung Hoon*, visited Vietnam in 2011, 2012 and 2013. In these visits, a series of week-long joint naval exercises focused on firefighting, maritime navigation, and navigating techniques were carried out between two sides. In July 2017, the U.S. warship *Coronado*, for the first time, docked at Cam Ranh Port and organized a five-day military exercise in which both navies practiced the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES), ship handling and medical evacuations. Such activities reflect the unprecedented emphasis on U.S.–Vietnam military exchanges and cooperation.

During the visit to Hai Phong's Chua Ve Port made in September 2012, the *Shikishima* vessel of the Japan Coast Guard held a rescue exercise with the Vietnam Marine Police and Vietnam Maritime Administration. In 2013, Japan's Ministry of Defense organized a seminar and offered training on underwater medicine for Vietnamese Naval officers at a Japanese naval facility.⁶⁴ In 2016, the Vietnamese Navy and Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force also conducted combined SAR and CUES exercises in Vietnam's waters.⁶⁵ In June 2017, the first joint exercise between the Japanese Coast Guard and the Vietnamese Maritime Police of Da Nang was organized to enhance Vietnam's capacity in the face of illegal fishing activities by foreign vessels.⁶⁶ In January 2018, the first military exercise between Vietnam and India christened VINBAX was organized in six days in Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh. This joint exercise was specially designed to train Vietnamese military officers in UN Peace Keeping Operation.

Naval Presence, Port Calls at Vietnam's Naval Bases

Naval presence is defined as “the exercise of naval diplomacy in a general way involving deployments, port visits, exercising and routine operating in areas of interest to declare interest, reassure friends and allies and to deter” in British Maritime Doctrine (2004).⁶⁷ Port calls by foreign warships are a generally non-sensitive and effective way to build goodwill and showcase a nation’s naval capabilities.⁶⁸ According to Geoffrey Till, “naval presence as a whole can take many forms: it can be routine and continuous, as a rule in areas considered important and where a country wishes to demonstrate an interest; it can be periodic and regular [...]; and there is something that may be called stand-by presence, when ships are moved to a location as a political gesture whilst the political objective is still to be determined.”⁶⁹ The number of port calls to Vietnam has increased in frequency since the late 2000s (see Table 1). Hai Phong, Sai Gon, Da Nang and Cam Ranh ports have regularly received naval visits from the United States, India and Japan. The U.S. military presence in Vietnam has been growing steadily, with the organization of annual Naval Engagement Activity (NEA) and biennial visits of the Pacific Partnership humanitarian assistance mission of the U.S. Forces since 2010.⁷⁰ Indeed, the U.S. Navy has made port visits annually since 2009. After Vietnam allowed foreign naval forces to use the strategic Cam Ranh Bay naval base on the South China Sea “for peaceful objectives” in late 2010, the U.S. naval “non-combat ships” started to carry out annual replenishment and maintenance there. It is worth highlighting that, in October 2010, the United States became the first country to advocate Vietnamese PM Nguyen Tan Dung’s announcement of opening the Cam Ranh Bay port facilities for all foreign navies. In March 2010, the United States depot ship *Richard E. Byrd* docked at Cam Ranh Bay for maintenance, thereby setting a precedent for other port calls of U.S. naval ships at this naval base. The transport vessel *Richard E. Byrd* and four vessels of the U.S. Navy were then maintained and repaired in Cam Ranh Bay in August 2011 and June 2012, respectively. The Indian Navy has been making regular visits to this port. In November 2015, Vietnam also invited a Japanese warship to visit its Cam Ranh Bay base and hold their first ever joint naval exercise when hosting the first official visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping in Hanoi. Since 2016, many naval ships of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force have annually visited this port.

Arms Sale and Military Aid

Vietnam has been gradually modernizing its VPA and has enhanced the capacity of maritime law enforcement agencies, navy and air force. Its defense budget was increased from USD 1.3 billion in 2006 to USD 4.6 billion in 2015 which made the country become the fourth largest in Southeast Asia (Abuza and Nguyen 2016). Although Russia is a major military-technical provider, Vietnam has diversified its arms providers and sources of military assistance. Vietnam seeks to conclude major arms deals of submarines, frigates, fighters, anti-ship batteries, missiles and other coastal defenses, from the United States, India and Japan. Through the State Department’s Foreign

Military Financing and law enforcement capacity-building programs, the United States gave Vietnam military aid of USD 18 million to procure coast guard patrol vessels for its Coast Guard units in 2013, and USD 40.1 million for the purchase of maritime defense equipment in the fiscal year 2015–2016. Since Obama announced the full lifting of arms embargo in 2016, Vietnam has negotiated with Western countries and U.S. arms manufacturers on defense purchases regarding fighter jets, helicopters, and maritime patrol aircraft. For Japan, the modernization and capacity enhancement of Vietnam's maritime enforcement agencies have become a priority of its assistance program under Abe's administration.⁷¹ Several days after the end of a Vietnam–China maritime dispute on China's oil rig HD 981 in 2014, Japan signed an agreement granting Non-Project Grant Aid of JPY 500 million by providing six used patrol boats and related equipment to Vietnam's maritime law-enforcement agencies. During the trip to Vietnam in January 2017, PM Abe promised to deliver six additional patrol boats worth USD 338 million to the Vietnam coast guard. In 2016, India's PM Modi offered Vietnam a USD 500 million line of credit for defense procurement, and USD five million to set up an Army Software Park in Nha Trang.⁷² A contract for constructing and delivering four Ocean Patrol Vessels was also signed this year. India has provided service programs to improve and better all existing Vietnamese military equipment, including thermal sights and fire control systems for armored vehicles, T-54 and T-55 tanks, and M-17/MI-8 helicopters, which were supported by the Soviet Union in the past.⁷³

Limitations and Constraints

While being a rational choice determined, guided, and facilitated by both domestic and external dynamics, Vietnam's further development of defense diplomacy faces significant limitations and constraints. First, domestic politics have caused constraints to Vietnam's further development of defense cooperation with major powers, especially “a former enemy” like the United States. Defense has traditionally been quite conservative and the most sensitive area for Vietnam's politics, with strong emphasis on self-reliance.⁷⁴ Indeed, the 2009 DWP mentions that “the priorities in Vietnam's defense relations with other countries are the exchange of military delegations, information and experience sharing, cooperation in training and education, and solving humanitarian issues.”⁷⁵ This limitation has defined the scope and level of the bilateral security cooperation of Vietnam. Practical and less sensitive areas like non-traditional security issues, maritime security, maritime search and rescue, UN peacekeeping actions, humanitarian aid and defense education and research exchanges are open to greater cooperation. Moreover, joint military exercises conducted with Japan, India and the United States have not included any live fire or combat exercises, mostly consisting of noncombat exercises within the framework of UN peacekeeping operations, search, rescue, and disaster control operations (see Table 1).⁷⁶ Unlike Malaysia which is also being involved in the territorial disputes in the South China Sea joint full exercises, Vietnam did not take part in the 2011 Joint Exercise Cobra Gold—the largest U.S.-led military exercises in

Southeast Asia⁷⁷—and just sent observers to this event in 2016.⁷⁸ Vietnam also joined the 2012 Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) led by the United States' Pacific Fleet as an observer.

Besides, the Vietnamese government has continuously affirmed its compliance with the so-called “three No's” principles in national defense policy—i.e. no military alliances, no alliances with any country against another, and no building foreign military bases on Vietnam's territory. Being selected in the aftermath of the normalization of relations between China and Vietnam in 1991, this policy aimed at reassuring Beijing that Hanoi had no hostile intent towards it.⁷⁹ However, in the new context, this non-alignment policy could cause some confusion or dilemma in strengthening the abovementioned bilateral defense interaction to a degree of mutual acceptability.

Finally, although Beijing's growing power raises a shared security concern to the countries in the Asia-Pacific, it remains a crucial economic partner for Vietnam and other countries. Also, in term of the geography and political regime, Vietnam is congruous with Beijing. Over the past decades, China has always been Vietnam's largest economic partner. The two-way trade volume makes up more than 20 percent of Vietnam's total foreign trade, with an annual growth of around 30 percent. In June 2013, Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang answered the press before his official visit to China, “We appreciate the promotion of friendship, comprehensive cooperation with Chinese Communist Party, State and People, and regard this as the basic, coherent, long-lasting and top priority in Vietnam's foreign policy.”⁸⁰ As a result, Vietnam has to take China into consideration when promoting security cooperation with other countries, making sure it does not threaten its relationship with China. The sudden deployment of China's oil rig HD 981 into Vietnam's claimed exclusive economic zone in May 2014 which caused the unprecedented anti-China protests throughout Vietnam and overseas⁸¹ definitely put the Vietnamese leaders into a dilemma as Vuving indicated: “If the state chooses confrontation rather than cooptation, it will lose its last legitimacy. But if it sides with the patriotic protesters, it will risk antagonizing China. The Communist Party draws legitimacy and its image as the protector of the country from its leadership role in past wars against foreign invaders.”⁸² Top-ranking Vietnamese leaders sent strong messages to Beijing about Vietnam's dissatisfaction and opposition through regular meetings with Washington and Tokyo, and the media was allowed to publish more open-minded discussions about China, which all “stirred up predictions about a shift in Vietnam's strategic thinking *vis-à-vis* China.”⁸³ It is worth noting that, in the wake of the controversy, Hanoi accepted Tokyo and Washington's provision of patrol vessels for building up the capacity of Vietnamese coast guard fleet. However, after China's withdrawal of the oil rig from the disputed waters on July 15, 2014, two Vietnamese high-ranking delegations led by Politburo member Le Hong Anh and Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh were sent to China in August and October 2014, respectively, during which the two sides agreed to “bring bilateral relations back to health.”⁸⁴ Moreover, the two countries' top leaders, Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong and President Xi Jinping, indicated in their reciprocal visits made in 2015 that the guiding principle for dealing with maritime disputes was to look at the friendly neighborliness,

a future-oriented outlook of overall bilateral relations and national development, the stability and prosperity in the region.⁸⁵ Before the second visit made in 2017, President Xi published a signed article titled “Opening a New Vista for China–Vietnam Friendship” on the CPV’s official newspaper (*Nhan dan—The People*) which recalls the traditional friendship between the two countries, especially Chinese massive assistance for Vietnam’s national liberation. Vietnam’s top three leaders elected at the CPV’s 12th Congress (2016) paid continuously an official visit to China in 2016 and 2017.⁸⁶ Consequently, while maintaining that the South China Sea disputes caused by China’s assertive behavior are the greatest challenge of national security and territorial integrity, there has been a growing belief in Vietnamese leaders that these can be addressed by active and enduringly engagement with China through diplomatic means.⁸⁷

Conclusion

The article indicates that Vietnam has shown strong eagerness to pursue a multi-polar balance among major powers including the United States, Japan and India for protection of its non-alignment, strategic autonomy, sovereignty, and national interests. In this sense, defense diplomacy has become a “foreign policy force multiplier.”⁸⁸ This rapid maturation of defense diplomacy has been mostly stemmed from the changing geopolitics in Asia, particularly China’s resurgence as a world power and its assertiveness in maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas. Another key underlying factor for deepening this defense cooperation in the post–Cold War era should include the agency role played by Vietnam in learning from the historical lessons of past mistakes, and in designing the strategic partnerships. In the field of defense, on the one hand, Vietnam has sought to preserve its longstanding policy of peace, independence and self-reliance through its three no’s defense policy that precludes alliances with a third country. On the other hand, Vietnam has pursued a policy of multilateralizing and diversifying its external defense relations through a network of strategic and comprehensive partnerships, with a prime focus on the major powers—Japan, India, and the United States. Vietnam has sought to stabilize these bilateral defense ties through joint exercises, a series of reciprocal high-level visits, defense education, and port calls. When taken as a whole, this web of international defense cooperation helps Vietnam to maintain its strategic autonomy and avoid being manipulated into a tug of war among powers. The progress of increasingly substantial defense ties raises questions not only about its origin, but also about the future given Vietnam’s complex interactions with China and domestic restraints. Vietnam has no other option but to gain leverage by playing on major power competitions, but it might be difficult for the country to expand and deepen its bilateral defense cooperation beyond the short-term need of stabilizing and securing its offshore waters and islands.

Table 1: Vietnam's Main Military Interactions with Major Powers

Activities	India	Japan	United States
High-level delegation exchanges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - November 2009: visit of Vietnamese defense minister Phung Quang Thanh to India - July 2010: visit of Indian defense minister and Chief of Army Staff to Vietnam - June 2011: visit of Vietnamese Chief of Navy to India - September 2013: visit of Head of the Vietnam Coast Guard to India - May 2015: visit of Vietnamese defense minister Phung Quang Thanh to India - June 2016: visit of Indian Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar to Vietnam - December 2016: visit of Vietnamese defense minister Ngo Xuan Lich to India - October 2017: Indian Chairman of Chiefs of Staff Committee and Chief of the Naval Staff visited Vietnam - June 2018: visit of Indian Defense Minister Nirmala Sitharaman to Vietnam 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - November 2011: visit of Vietnamese defense minister Phung Quang Thanh to Japan - November 2012: Administrative Vice-Minister of Defense visited Vietnam - September 2013: visit of Japanese Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera to Cam Ranh Port - November 2015: Japanese Minister of Defense Gen Nakatani worked in Vietnam - December 2017: a delegation from the Japan Self-Defense Forces visited Vietnam - January 2018: Chief-of-Staff of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force visited Vietnam - April 2018: visit of Vietnamese defense minister Ngo Xuan Lich to Japan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - December 2009: visit of Vietnamese defense minister Phung Quang Thanh to the U.S. - June 2012: visit of U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta to Cam Ranh Port. - April 2015: visit of U.S. Secretary of the Navy to Vietnam - June 2015: visit of U.S. Defense Secretary - Ash Carter to Vietnam - August 2016: visit of Vietnamese defense minister Ngo Xuan Lich to the U.S. - January 2018: visit of U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis to Vietnam

Activities	India	Japan	United States
Naval visits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - April 2009: visit of two navy destroyers, <i>Ins-Mumbai</i> and <i>Ins-Ranvir</i> to Haiphong - July 2011: visit of naval ship <i>INS Atravat</i> of India to Nha Trang, Haiphong - June 2013: visit of the guided-missile frigate <i>INS Satpura</i> (F48), the logistics ship <i>INS Shakti</i> (A57), the destroyer <i>INS Ranvijay</i> (D55), and the corvette <i>INS Kirch</i> (P62) to Danang - May 2014: visit of Indian naval ship <i>INS Shivalik</i> to Haiphong - August 2014: visit of Indian naval ship <i>INS Sahyadri</i> to Haiphong - October 2015: visit of Indian naval ship <i>INS Sahyadri</i> to Danang - May–June 2016: visit of Indian Naval Ships <i>Satpura</i> and <i>Kirch</i> under the Command of the Flag Officer Commanding Eastern Fleet, Rear Admiral S. V. Bhokare, YSM, NM to Cam Ranh Port - September 2017: visit of the stealth frigate <i>INS Satpura</i> (F48) and the anti-submarine warfare corvette <i>INS Kadmatt</i> (P29) warships of Indian Navy to Haiphong - January 2018: visit of <i>INS Sumeedha</i> numbered P58, an Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) of the Indian navy to Hochiminh port - May 2018: visit of frigate <i>INS Sahyadri</i>, oil tanker <i>INS Shakti</i> and corvette <i>INS Kamorta</i> to Danang 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - September 2012: visit of <i>Shikishima</i> vessel of the Japan Coast Guard to Haiphong - April 2016: visit of the guided-missile destroyers <i>Ariake</i> and <i>Setogiri</i> to Cam Ranh port - July 2017: visit of Japan Coast Guard Training Vessel to Danang - April 2017: visit of the <i>Fuyuzuki</i> ship of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force to Cam Ranh Port - May 2017: visit of Japanese self-defense forces to Cam Ranh port. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - November 2009: visit of naval ships <i>USS Blue Ridge</i> and <i>USS Lassen</i> to Danang - August 2010: visit of missile destroyer <i>John McCain</i> to Danang - March 2010: visit of the depot ship <i>Richard Byrd</i> to Cam Ranh Port for a half-month of maintenance - July 2011: visit of the guided missile destroyers <i>USS Chung-Hoon</i>, <i>USS Preble</i>, <i>USNS Safeguard</i> to Danang. - August 2011, June 2012: visit of the transport vessel <i>Richard E. Byrd</i> and four vessels of the U.S. Navy for maintenance - April 2012: visit of <i>USS Chung-Hoon</i> and <i>USNS Savor</i> to Danang - April 2015: visit of the destroyer <i>Fitzgerald</i> and the littoral combat ship <i>Fort Worth</i>, the expeditionary fast transport ship <i>Millinocket</i> and the hospital ship <i>Mercy</i> to Danang. - October 2016: visit of Submarine tender <i>USS Frank Cable</i> and guided-missile destroyer <i>USS John S. McCain</i> to Cam Ranh port - July 2017: visit of the U.S. littoral combat ship <i>Coronado</i> and the rescue-salvage ship <i>Savior</i> to Cam Ranh port. - November 2017: visit of U.S. Pacific Partnership 17 to Khanh Hoa and Danang - March 2018: visit of Navy aircraft carrier <i>Carl Vinson</i> to Danang

Activities	India	Japan	United States
<p>Joint military exercises</p>	<p>- January 2018: 1st joint military exercise VINBAX</p>	<p>- September 2012: a rescue rehearsal held between <i>Shikishima</i> vessel of the Japan Coast Guard and Vietnam Marine Police, Vietnam Maritime Administration in Haiphong</p> <p>- July 2017: joint exercise between the Japanese Coast Guard and the Vietnamese Maritime Police of Danang</p>	<p>- September 2009: 1st humanitarian, search and rescue mission—Operation Pacific Angel—held between the 13th Air Force Division of the U.S. Pacific Command and VPA.</p> <p>- August 10, 2010: 1st “non-combat military”-themed joint maritime search, rescue, and disaster control operation, with <i>USS John S. McCain</i>’s participation.</p> <p>- July 15, 2011: joint maritime search, rescue exercise</p> <p>- April 2012, 2014: joint naval non-combatant exercise</p> <p>- July 2017: joint military exercise on the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea, ship handling and medical evacuations.”</p>

Source: Author’s Compilation

Notes

1. This paper represents the author's own views and does not reflect those of the institution with which she is affiliated.
2. In this paper, the words "military" and "defense" are used loosely and interchangeably.
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Note on Contributor

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