

DIPLOMAT
27 March 2020

Beyond Port Visits, US-Vietnam Relations Can Go Further

There is ample room to expand the burgeoning U.S.-Vietnam relationship.

By Matthew Dalton

From enemies during the Vietnam War to a comprehensive partnership forged on mutual cooperation U.S.-Vietnam relations have come a long way. Political and economic components have played key roles in the ongoing normalization of affairs, but so too has the military. As Vietnam seeks to hedge against China's growing influence in the region, now is the time for the United States and Vietnam to push their relationship to a new frontier.

From March 5 to 9 the USS Theodore Roosevelt made a port call in Vietnam's coastal city of Da Nang. This is just the second time a U.S. aircraft carrier has made such a visit, the first coming in 2003 when the USS Vandegriff's stopped in Da Nang. Between these visits, U.S.-Vietnam relations have not stood still. Smaller U.S. navy ships have visited the country with increasing frequency, and since 2009, the two countries have conducted annual Naval Engagement Activities (NEA) that include exchanges, exercises, and capacity-building with Vietnam's coast guard. Along with those engagements, the 2013 comprehensive partnership and the 2017 joint statement that followed also have tightened the mutual cooperation.

Despite this progress, there is room to expand this burgeoning relationship. While a full mutual defense alliance would be a bridge too far in today's geopolitical environment, building upon what has already been accomplished will lead both countries toward a strong and lasting strategic partnership.

Vietnam has historically relied on Russian equipment and arms deals to equip its military. This poses interoperability challenges for bilateral U.S.-Vietnam training and exercises. One way the U.S. has addressed this issue has been to provide security funding and assistance to Vietnam. Under the Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative (SAMSI), the U.S. has given Vietnam \$26.25 million to enhance its maritime domain awareness and strengthen their ability to protect their rights and freedoms under the international law of the sea. And from FY2013 to FY2018, the U.S. State Department provided Vietnam \$56 million in bilateral security assistance under the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program. This money funded the transfer and refurbishment of a former U.S. Coast Guard cutter and fast patrol boats for Vietnam.

The U.S. should expand this bilateral security assistance. Providing resources for Vietnam to build out a more Western-aligned fleet of vessels will lead to a significant increase in naval engagement pursuits, and significantly reduce existing interoperability issues.

When it comes to the engagement activities themselves, the U.S. is trending in a positive direction. In addition to increasing the number of bilateral NEA events, Vietnam was a participant in Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) 2018, the world's largest international maritime exercise, and is again scheduled to participate in 2020. Building off this event, both countries should conduct U.S.-Vietnam bilateral freedom of navigation operations in the disputed South China Sea to uphold legitimate claims in accordance with international law.

Beyond these incremental upgrades both nations should seek a more lasting strategic partnership. One possibility is to establish a U.S.-Vietnam defense cooperation agreement, much like the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) that the U.S. has with the Philippines. Despite the recent turbulence in U.S.-Philippines relations, the agreement, signed in 2014, bolstered the U.S.-Philippine alliance and helped address Chinese aggression in the South China Sea.

In continuing to reshape U.S.-Vietnam relations, aspects of the EDCA provide useful examples to follow. A similarly structured agreement would reinforce the United States' commitment to Vietnam and reassure other Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) partners in the region that the U.S. will not leave them to fend off China's aggressive actions alone.

Article 1 of the EDCA establishes that the agreement will focus on improving interoperability, addressing short-term capabilities gaps, promoting long-term modernization, and helping maintain and develop additional maritime security, maritime domain awareness, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief capabilities. Similar wording that expands the 2013 U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership would make for a strong pact.

To accomplish the EDCA goals, the Philippines was to allow U.S. troops and military platforms to preposition equipment in several locations. This has proven to be difficult for the U.S. mainly due to Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte's anti-American positioning. However, for Vietnam, the timing seems ripe. Last summer's months-long standoff in the Vanguard bank raised China-Vietnam tensions to their highest level in years. Vietnam's recent defense white paper contained a clear message to China — if China's South China Sea coercion continued, Vietnam's government would be forced into closer relations with the United States.

For this strategy to work, the White House would need to recognize that such a defense agreement would apply to the South China Sea — something the current administration is hesitant to say outright. But if the White House can adjust its stance, the United States stands to gain a repositioning of U.S. military forces in Vietnam that would serve as a deterrent to China's aggressive maneuvers. The posture would also support further bilateral U.S.-Vietnam freedom of navigation patrols in the region.

The agreement should be approached not only from a military perspective, but from an economic one as well. Vietnam's ties with China are complex. Notwithstanding China's enhanced level of aggression in the region, Vietnam still understands the importance of its economic bonds with China and has been hesitant to disrupt these relations. Therefore, for any meaningful change to take place, the U.S. needs to come to the negotiating table with an agreement that provides Vietnam with enhanced trade and economic benefits.

Improving relations with Vietnam is not all or nothing, as the late Senator John McCain recognized. For years in the U.S. Senate, the former prisoner of war in Vietnam was a leading advocate for improving U.S. ties with Hanoi. As McCain explained, he believed that a Vietnam strong enough to resist Chinese aggression was in the national security interest of the United States. He also believed that military engagement went hand in hand with political and economic engagement. Demonstrating that there are benefits to working with the U.S. makes it harder for anti-Western, anti-reform elements in Vietnam's government to gain ground. Critically, McCain also believed that improving relations does not void Washington's ability to press Hanoi on issues ranging from human rights to political liberalization, which the late senator often did.

Each point still holds true today, and each can guide U.S.-Vietnam relations going forward. Despite world attention revolving around the COVID-19 pandemic, let's not miss the opportunity presented by current circumstances to strategically align and confront the challenges of today and tomorrow.

Lieutenant Commander Matthew Dalton, U.S. Navy, is the Federal Executive Fellow at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. He has conducted intelligence and cyberspace operations focused on multiple theaters throughout the world. The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Navy, U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.