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Will Vietnam Be America's Next Strategic Partner?

By Alexander L. Vuving

Times of trouble are often times of truth. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for people to signal their true commitment to friends. To get a sense of how close countries are in geopolitical terms and how warm their relationships are, one can simply count the number of high-level visits or the amount of COVID-19 vaccines donated between them.

If these indicators have something to say, then Vietnam is the closest to the United States – and the farthest from China – among all Southeast Asian countries. The United States and Vietnam have conducted three high-level visits since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 – and the count will soon be four. Then-U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo traveled to Vietnam in October 2020, followed by then-National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien in November. Last month, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin went to Vietnam during a tour of three Southeast Asian countries that also included Singapore and the Philippines. U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris will arrive in Vietnam on Tuesday as part of her first trip to Asia.

There have been two high-levels visits between China and Vietnam in the same span. Chinese Minister of Public Security Zhao Kezhi traveled to Vietnam in February 2021, followed by Defense Minister Wei Fenghe in April. Most tellingly, since the pandemic began, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and State Councilor Yang Jiechi have visited all member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) except Vietnam.

The donation of COVID-19 vaccines can also measure the warmth between nations. So far China has donated to Vietnam, a country of nearly 100 million people, a total of 700,000 doses, including 500,000 doses prioritized for Chinese citizens, residents of the provinces bordering China, and Vietnamese travelers to China, and 200,000 doses for the Vietnam People's Army. By comparison, China gave Laos, a country of 7 million people, nearly 3 million doses. For Vietnam, the United States is by far the biggest donor, with 5 million doses given as gift.

But these indications are at odds with the official designations of their relationships. Vietnam calls 14 countries its "strategic partners" and three additional countries – China, Russia, and India – are "comprehensive strategic partners." As a mere "comprehensive partner," the United States stands in a lower-level category, together with Argentina, Denmark, and Hungary. Why the discrepancy?

The relationship between Washington and Hanoi is one of the most delicate and most subtle in the world. Historical memories, ideological differences, and domestic concerns often make things unspeakable in this growing relationship. But the largest factor of all that renders the U.S.-Vietnam relationship so delicate and so subtle is China. It is also the critical factor that makes and unmakes the strategic aspect of U.S.-Vietnam ties.

It was to placate China that the Carter administration shelved normalization with Vietnam in 1978, helping to delay the normalization until well after the Cold War. Fast forward to the early 2000s, when the George W. Bush administration considered Vietnam as a potential strategic partner because it regarded China as a potential strategic competitor. In 2008, Vietnam joined the

negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a grouping thought to be a key counterweight to China's economic juggernaut, at Washington's invitation.

The United States officially offered a strategic partnership with Vietnam in July 2010 when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met Vietnamese leaders in Hanoi. She came to attend an ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting at which she declared U.S. national interests in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea. Traveling to Hanoi again in July 2012, she gave Vietnam one of the strongest public supports in its feud with China over the South China Sea. She also invited Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) chief Nguyen Phu Trong, who had no counterpart in the United States, to Washington the next year.

This sparked a major debate within the Vietnamese leadership. While integrationists were eager to broaden cooperation with the Western superpower, anti-Westerners worried that this would erode Communist Party rule. Commemorating the 1972 U.S. Christmas bombing of Hanoi, in December 2012, Vietnam's Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh warned that Washington could invade the country again "when the opportunity arises." The next year, it was President Truong Tan Sang, not party chief Trong, who went to the United States, and at his visit, the two countries raised their ties to a "comprehensive partnership," a level below the "strategic" one.

It took a Chinese crossing of Hanoi's red line to push Vietnam across a self-imposed red line in its U.S. relations. When China parked its giant oil rig HYSY-981 within Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) for 75 days in the summer of 2014, relations between the two Communist countries plunged to the lowest point since their open hostility in the 1980s. Again, the United States came out with the strongest public support for Vietnam. It also matched word with deed by lifting a ban on maritime weapons sales to Hanoi. The oil rig crisis proved to be a litmus test and a game changer. It was the first time in history that Communist Vietnam trusted Washington more than it trusted Communist China. Since then, Vietnam's military leaders have stopped raising the prospects of a U.S. war against Vietnam.

When CPV chief Trong visited the White House in July 2015, Vietnam wanted to add the attribute "extensive" to their "comprehensive partnership," a patent imitation of the "extensive strategic partnership" that Japan and Vietnam announced in March 2014. The plan was not adopted, perhaps because Washington did not want a half-step. But trust between the two former enemies was bolstered enormously. The next year, bilateral trust received another boost when then-President Barack Obama visited Vietnam and, on the eve of his trip, completely ended the U.S. arms embargo imposed against Vietnam since 1975.

Meanwhile, China stepped up its encroachments into Vietnamese waters. After building large artificial islands in the Spratlys, Beijing ratcheted up its harassment of Vietnam's offshore hydrocarbon exploration, forcing Hanoi to scrap new projects and pay dearly for contract breakage. By 2018, the Vietnamese Politburo greenlighted preparations for elevating ties with the United States to a formal strategic partnership. As the plans went, President Nguyen Phu Trong would visit President Donald Trump in late 2019 and the two would announce the new designation. But Trong's health issues intervened, and his trip was postponed indefinitely.

When the White House changed tenants in January 2021, a new uncertainty shrouded the old plans. Being at the receiving end of China's increasing aggression in the South China Sea, Vietnam kept its hopes for an upgrade in U.S.-Vietnam ties. On more than one occasion, senior

Vietnamese diplomats publicly noted that the bilateral partnership was already “strategic in essence” despite being “comprehensive” in name.

The Biden administration also signaled its desire for a strategic partnership with Vietnam. Its Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, issued in March 2021, named Vietnam as one of a few countries that Washington would focus on to “deepen our partnership ... to advance shared objectives.” Testifying before the Senate on July 13, President Joe Biden’s nominee to be the next ambassador to Vietnam, Marc Knapper, said, “Right now, we have what we call a comprehensive partnership; we hope to raise it to a strategic partnership, and I will take steps to do that by strengthening even further our security relationships with Vietnam.” Two weeks later, Vietnamese leaders could hear this U.S. intention directly from visiting Secretary of Defense Austin. The momentum is now set for the two countries to announce their long overdue strategic partnership the next time their top leaders meet in person.

In the large scheme of things, the strategic rivalries between the United States and China and between Vietnam and China continue to converge. Both the United States and Vietnam are among the countries most committed to preventing Chinese domination of Southeast Asia. Both are eager to maintain a rules-based international order in the South China Sea. And both are interested in restructuring the international supply chains to reduce excessive dependence on the Chinese market.

A strategic alliance between the United States and Vietnam is the logical result of this convergence. Its formal designation matters because it codifies commitment and helps domestic and bilateral coordination, but it will lag behind the informal realities because of the need to minimize Chinese apprehension. The extent of the lag depends primarily on the intensity of the rivalries. Looking into the future, as these rivalries are certain to grow, U.S.-Vietnam relations may be elevated to a “comprehensive strategic partnership” within a decade.

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