



The flags of the People's Republic of China and Vietnam painted on a concrete wall. (Photo by MasterSergeant via Adobe Stock)

Sino-Vietnamese Defense Relations

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Since the U.S. pivot to the Indo-Pacific in 2011, countries in the region have fallen squarely in the middle of a competition for influence between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). One country in particular, Vietnam, stands above the rest in terms of potential to influence the stability and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific. Vietnam has tremendous promise in industry, with a large and

young labor force along with a great wealth of natural resources, including the second largest reserve of rare-earth metals and third largest reserve of tungsten, among others.¹ Vietnam is not a petty state either, with a military that consistently ranks among the world's ten largest standing armies with around 482,000 active-duty personnel and nearly five million reservists.² Vietnam's military receives consistent reforms to its

forces and updates to its arsenal, embarking on modernization and defense budget increases.³ Vietnam also consistently engages with the international community on issues of importance such as international maritime law and climate change.⁴

Recognizing this potential, the United States has steadily increased engagement and cooperation with Vietnam. These overtures culminated in President Joseph Biden's visit to Vietnam in September 2023, during which Vietnam elevated its relationship with the United States to a "comprehensive strategic partnership," Vietnam's highest level, setting the United States on par with Russia and China.⁵ Accompanying this relationship upgrade are plans for economic cooperation, particularly in the critical areas of rare-earth metal extraction/processing and semiconductor manufacturing, along with proposals for arms deals.

However, in December 2023, Vietnam also hosted PRC President Xi Jinping, and with that visit came thirty-six agreements on cooperation between Vietnam and the PRC in various areas.⁶ Following this, at the start of 2024, Vietnam embarked on a series of political purges and issued the secretive Directive 24, all designed to reinforce the Vietnamese Communist Party and resist foreign, particularly Western, influence.⁷ These developments caused concern that the relationship between the United States and Vietnam was losing traction, and that the progress that was made would be lost with a Vietnamese pivot toward China.⁸ Vietnam then hosted Russian President Vladimir Putin in June 2024, and increased cooperation between Vietnam and both Russia and China seemed to mark Vietnam's decisive relapse into authoritarianism, moving cooperation with the United States and its allies out of reach.⁹ However, such a perspective lacks the appropriate nuance necessary when considering Vietnamese foreign policy.

Vietnamese leaders consistently express two guiding principles for their foreign policy that help to contextualize Vietnam's actions when considering recent events. These are the "Four Nos" and "Bamboo Diplomacy." The Four Nos consist of no participating in military alliances, no siding with one country to act against another, no foreign military bases, and no using force in international relations.¹⁰ The Four Nos doctrine emphasizes Vietnamese neutrality and explains why Vietnam is able to gain American, Chinese, and Russian security

assistance. Bamboo Diplomacy is an expression of Vietnam's autonomy and reflects the balancing act that Vietnam has to embark on.¹¹ Vietnam must keep its aggressive neighbor China at bay while maintaining its old friendship with Russia and forging a new path forward with the United States. The direct result of centuries of colonization and being caught in the crosshairs of great powers, these foreign policy concepts inform Vietnamese decision-making.

Various considerations must be made when assessing a military relationship between two states. This article's focus centers on military diplomacy, conventional security cooperation, and internal security cooperation. Within these categories are activities such as key-leader engagements, joint military exercises, professional military exchange, and others. While not an exhaustive list, these aspects provide valuable insight, and both the frequency and substance of cooperation are vital in determining the strength of a defense relationship along each dimension. For instance, infrequent action and a lack of tangible results indicate a weaker relationship. Individual activities may not offer substantial insights into military-to-military relations, but a comprehensive analysis promises a clearer and more accurate picture.

The fears of losing Vietnam as a potent partner are overstated, and given the complete historical and geopolitical context, Vietnam's relationship with the United States has not diminished and can only improve. This article assesses the status of Sino-Vietnamese defense relations and explores the implications of their military collaboration in the context of the recent cooperation between the two countries. By evaluating Vietnamese military engagement with the PRC through the lens of Vietnam's foreign policy, this article seeks to allay fears that a potent partner in the Indo-Pacific will be lost to China.

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Military Diplomacy

Key leader engagements between senior defense officials are a foundational part of military-to-military relations and are a consistent fixture in dialogue between neighbors Vietnam and China. The relationship between China and Vietnam is characterized by routine high-level meetings that reflect the security environment experienced by both countries. For instance, in 2017, the Chinese Ministry of National Defense cancelled an event in Vietnam in response to heightened tensions in the South China Sea.¹² When relations improved in 2019, high-level defense meetings resumed, expanding to include internal security matters in 2023 and greater naval/maritime engagement in 2024.¹³

Memorandums of understanding (MOU) constitute tangible results from key-leader engagements and provide indicators of the strength and vitality of a military-to-military relationship. The first defense MOU between the two countries is a 2019 agreement that pertains to military medical cooperation and professional military exchange.¹⁴ There were no MOUs signed until September 2023, when in the days shortly following the conclusion of Biden's visit to Vietnam, the Ministries of Public Security in Vietnam and China affirmed that they would deepen cooperation on internal security matters.¹⁵ Significant growth in Vietnam and China's military relationship came in December 2023 as Xi made his first visit to Vietnam in nearly five years. Amid the thirty-six agreements signed by the PRC and Vietnam, the two countries also signed another MOU on internal security and one on future joint patrols in the contested Gulf of Tonkin.¹⁶ Further Sino-Vietnamese cooperation consisted of an MOU on political security in January 2024, coinciding with the initiation of Vietnam's political purges.¹⁷ Perhaps the strongest advancement in these two countries' relationship is an April 2024 MOU on establishing a hotline between the Vietnam and China's navies, marking their very first MOU related to resolving maritime disputes.¹⁸ This set the stage for an unprecedented 3+3 strategic dialogue in December, prioritizing diplomacy, defense, and public security. Despite the novelty of this diplomatic mechanism however, analysts do not anticipate Vietnam's current posture to lean toward China, but rather is a natural outcome in order for it to consolidate its position in the South China Sea.¹⁹ It is

clear from these agreements that cooperation between Vietnam and the PRC increases as Vietnam experiences instability in domestic politics and when Vietnam increases engagement with the United States, constituting responses made under duress.

Conventional Security Cooperation

Despite the extensive level of engagement, defense cooperation between the PRC and Vietnam is somewhat weaker when it comes to conventional military matters than the dialogue would suggest. This comes as no surprise, given that the two countries have a long history of military antagonism. Areas of conventional military cooperation consist of combat exercises among the two countries' armies, navies, and air forces, professional military exchanges, and defense technology coproduction and purchases.

The defense relationship between the PRC and Vietnam is considerably weaker regarding military exercises. From 2003 to 2022, there were no conventional, bilateral army, navy, or air force exercises between Vietnam and China.²⁰ The bilateral exercises that both Vietnam and China did participate in were focused on policing, emergency, and medical scenarios.²¹ The conventional exercises that had Vietnamese and Chinese involvement were all multilateral, such as Aman Youyi 2023.²² Multilateral exercises have fewer participants per country, given the expenses associated with conducting training events of that nature, and so do not present an opportunity for Vietnamese and Chinese forces to cultivate an exclusive relationship that reflects the discourse surrounding the two countries.

Professional military exchange generally refers to exchanges of military officers to study at another country's command/staff college. The exact size and frequency of exchange between Vietnam and China are uncertain but are moderate in scale. There is a sustained relationship between the National Defense Academy of Vietnam and the Defense University of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) dating back to 2019 that includes training courses on possible areas of cooperation.²³ In addition, China's Naval University of Engineering and the Dalian Naval Academy lists Vietnam as one country among many that had cadets receive instruction aboard the *Zheng He* training ship.²⁴ In 2016 and 2024, Vietnam and the PRC held a young officer exchange program in which the



Vietnamese delegation received tours of PLA installations and units along with exposure to Chinese weaponry.²⁵ As well, in May 2024, the ground force units of both countries initiated discussions and preparation for another junior officer exchange, this time focused on border tasks.²⁶ The professional military exchanges that Vietnam engages in with the PRC is only somewhat comparable to the annual exchanges conducted with the United States in scale.²⁷

Given the data gathered from open sources during this research, there is no evidence of defense technology coproduction between Vietnam and China. As well, there is no available evidence of any defense technology imports or exports between the two countries since the Vietnam War.²⁸ Vietnam's principal source of arms imports is Russia, but in recent years, it has reached out to the United States and its partners to diversify its armaments.²⁹ Vietnam's lack of definitive military alliances means that it can select from a wide range of countries to act as suppliers, and despite this, China is largely absent from involvement in Vietnamese military procurement.

However, on 24 October 2024, Vietnamese Minister of Defense Phan Văn Giang and Vice

Xi Jinping (left), China's president and general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, holds a welcome ceremony for Tô Lâm, Vietnam's president and general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Central Committee at the square outside the east gate of the Great Hall of the People on 19 August 2024. Xi held talks with Lam, who was on a state visit to China, at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. (Photo by Zhai Jianlan, Xinhua)

Chairman of China's Central Military Commission Zhang Youxia signed a "Letter of Intent" on strengthening military cooperation, with defense industrial cooperation and military trade being included for the first time.³⁰ While the details of the letter are vague, Vietnam is not expected to procure high value weaponry, but rather focus on noncombat equipment and technology transfer in order to develop its own capabilities. This is due to the fact that there still remain territorial antagonisms between the PRC and Vietnam, and so such a letter of intent cannot be construed as anything more than continued diplomatic balancing and investigating means for equipment diversification, rather than a trend toward a PRC friendly alignment.³¹ All of this holds true even as Chinese firms were invited to attend the Vietnam Defense Expo for the very first time in December 2024, as Chinese firms made up

only two out of over 140 different participants at the expo, but fourteen U.S. firms were in attendance.³²

Internal Security Cooperation

In contrast to conventional security cooperation, internal security cooperation is the dominant feature in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. Vietnam has subscribed to the conceptual framework of a “Community of a Shared Future for Socialist Countries” [社会主义国家命运共同体] set forth by Xi, and with that comes an extensive partnership formed with the purpose of upholding regime security between the two countries.³³ The components of the military internal security relationship consist of the maritime, land, cyberspace, and intelligence domains.

From 2006 to the present, China and Vietnam have regularly conducted joint coast guard patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin, and exchanges among coast guard personnel strengthen cooperation on maritime law enforcement.³⁴ China has also hosted joint exercises such as Aman Youyi in 2023, which focused on combating piracy and law enforcement at sea, but these exercises were not bilateral and were exclusive to Vietnam and China.³⁵

Border security and operations on land are also a major area of cooperation, with China and Vietnam working together to crack down on illicit activity and illegal migration.³⁶ The PRC’s People’s Armed Police and its Ministry of Public Security have received extensive requests for training for police and paramilitary units in Vietnam to develop their internal security capabilities.³⁷ The land exercises between China and Vietnam like Thiên Thành 2016 and Peace Rescue 2021 emphasize counterterrorism operations and mass medical emergencies.³⁸

Further internal security engagement between Vietnam and China takes place in cyberspace and serves as a foundational part of internal security strategy, enabling tighter control and surveillance. This sort of collaboration takes the form of partnerships, training programs, and mutual agreements that are aimed at boosting political security and resisting external threats. For instance, the Chinese company Meiya Pico and the Guangxi Communist Party’s Baise Executive Leadership Academy provide Vietnamese officials with digital forensics and cybersecurity training that focuses on surveillance and censorship.³⁹ As well, there is a strong similarity between the two countries in the

language and methods employed in passing and enforcing internal security laws. A line-by-line analysis of Vietnam’s Cybersecurity Law and China’s Law on Cybersecurity reveal strikingly similar regulations, terminology, and enforcement mechanisms.⁴⁰ All of this cooperation culminates in Vietnam’s Task Force 47, a military cyber unit that mimics and takes inspiration from China’s approach to internet governance.⁴¹

Despite this level of common training and methodology, intelligence exchanges between Vietnam and the PRC are limited and new. Following Xi’s visit to Vietnam in December 2023, the two countries agreed to share intelligence to protect regime security and counter “color-revolutions,” marking the first time that both Vietnam and China have referred to regime security in a joint statement.⁴² With that said, China also broadly shares intelligence with ASEAN for counterterrorism cooperation, border crime prevention, and maritime security operations, with the most recent agreement taking place in November 2023 among China, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam.⁴³ Whether there is a direct exchange of intelligence between Vietnam and the PRC in these particular instances is uncertain, but this demonstrates potential for increased intelligence cooperation between the two countries.

Of note, however, is that cyberattacks between the two countries reveal a lack of trust that would preclude any widespread or particularly significant intelligence sharing. In 2017, coinciding with a resurgence in tensions within the South China Sea, Vietnam experienced an uptick in Chinese cyber espionage attacks, targeting both official and corporate entities in Vietnam.⁴⁴ As well, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Vietnamese government employed a cyber espionage group known as APT32 to hack into Chinese servers to obtain information about COVID-19 when the PRC proved to be lacking in transparency about the crisis.⁴⁵ In light of these developments, it is no surprise then that broad and direct intelligence exchanges between the PRC and Vietnam have not been forthcoming.

Friction Between Vietnam and the PRC

While the relationship between Vietnam and the PRC presents ample opportunity for cooperation, there remain two notable points of contention: China’s claims in the South China Sea and the PRC’s growing

influence in Laos and Cambodia. Centuries of mutual hostility and Chinese domination have ingrained a strong distrust in Vietnam of its northern neighbor, exacerbated by the PRC's increasingly global reach.⁴⁶

Vietnam refuses to acknowledge the PRC's Nine-Dash Line claim in the South China Sea, and insists

in order to return Cambodia into its orbit and break up Vietnamese influence in Southeast Asia following Vietnam's ousting of Khmer Rouge and its installation of a pro-Vietnam regime.⁵⁵ Vietnam feels as though it is boxed in, and all of its neighbors are states that are not aligned with its interests. Both Laos and Cambodia

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that the Paracel and Spratly Islands belong to it and not China on the basis of historical use and according to UN conventions on the Law of the Sea.⁴⁷ Of particular note is that Vietnam maintains the PRC illegally invaded and seized the Paracel Islands in 1974, then controlled by the Republic of Vietnam, which would have been granted to the current Vietnamese regime following the Communist victory in 1975.⁴⁸ In consolidating its occupation of the Paracel Islands and part of the Spratly Islands, the PRC has engaged in construction of artificial islands, extended economic activity into Vietnamese waters, and deployed China Coast Guard and maritime militia ships to harass Vietnamese vessels.⁴⁹ Such behavior has resulted in standoffs, clashes, and Vietnam's own artificial island construction.⁵⁰ In fact, such confrontations over the South China Sea date as far back as 1994, and prominent incidents garnering international attention include the 2005 shooting of Vietnamese citizens by Chinese maritime police and the 2014 Hai Yang Shi You incident during which the PRC moved an oil rig to contested waters near the Paracel Islands.⁵¹

Furthermore, the PRC's growing influence over Laos and Cambodia causes Vietnam significant consternation.⁵² Laos previously saw Vietnam as its closest ally and partner but pivoted toward China in pursuit of funds and projects related to China's Belt and Road Initiative.⁵³ Cambodia fell under Vietnam's sphere of influence since imperial times, but it has since repudiated Vietnam and contests border claims in Vietnam's south.⁵⁴ There was also the historical issue of China initiating the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War

stymied Vietnamese efforts to act on its South China Sea claims in ASEAN and China supports both countries in unsustainably harnessing resources in the Mekong River, much to Vietnam's detriment.⁵⁶ None of these issues are regarded as minor disputes by Vietnam and only work to compound a historical reluctance to advance a relationship with the PRC.

Implications

Regardless of Chinese pressure, Russian overtures, and internal purges, the relationship between the United States and Vietnam promises to remain fruitful and constructive for both sides. Even amid the uptick in cooperation with China, Vietnam will likely not reverse its relatively favorable stance with the United States given the persistent threat that China poses to Vietnamese national interests. Moving forward with Vietnam, it is important to understand what signals the United States can convey that will lead Vietnam to be most receptive to U.S. overtures. This requires an understanding of Vietnamese foreign policy concepts, the China factor in Vietnam's foreign policy, and Vietnam's perception of the United States. It is important to note that while Vietnam may rely on China for internal security assistance, Vietnam unequivocally looks to the United States to help it develop capabilities to counter external threats.⁵⁷

Vietnam recognizes the value of having the United States as a partner over China, not the least because the United States' interests are not inherently opposed to Vietnam's. However, in addition to the China factor, Vietnam is reluctant to engage further with the



United States because it perceives the United States as a “fair-weather friend” and remains suspicious of U.S. intentions regarding regime change.⁵⁸ Given the United States’ history of wavering commitments, especially that with South Vietnam in particular, Vietnam is unwilling to stake everything on the United States, lest it has to face the PRC alone at a crucial juncture. As well, Vietnam remains a communist state that is profoundly authoritarian and repressive. The United States’ commitment to maintaining human rights and its dialogue toward Vietnam on the matter causes these ideals to be conflated in Vietnam’s mind with calls for regime change, something that the communist elite cannot accept.

Because of the threat to Vietnamese interests that China poses and the significant imbalance in power between the two states, Vietnam has very limited latitude in its foreign policy actions before the PRC exerts pressure on its southern neighbor.⁵⁹ Any outreach or engagement with the United States or even Russia must be accompanied with corresponding assurances to China that Vietnam would not replace the PRC as a partner, lest Vietnam feel the brunt of Chinese

Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III walks with Vietnam Minister of National Defense Phan Văn Giang prior to a bilateral exchange at the Pentagon, Washington, D.C., on 9 September 2024. (Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Alexander Kubitz, U.S. Department of Defense)

diplomatic pressure. As a result, the United States can only expect gradual progress when engaging with Vietnam, and any cooperation with the United States will have a counterbalance to it.

Nevertheless, despite misgivings and difficulties, Vietnam remains a partner with exceptional capability for promoting stability in the Indo-Pacific.⁶⁰ Vietnam’s latent potential will enable it to punch above its weight in the region, if only it would be able to fully engage in the cooperative frameworks present in the region with the United States and its allies. Biden’s visit to Vietnam in September 2023 marked major progress that cannot be turned back, despite Vietnam’s internal politics and relations with U.S. adversaries Russia and China. In the days following Putin’s visit, Daniel Krittenbrink, U.S. assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, arrived in Hanoi and reported that ties between the United States and Vietnam have never been

stronger.⁶¹ Following that visit, on 10 July, the USS *Blue Ridge* was granted permission to conduct a port call at the harbor Cam Ranh Bay, an exclusive honor given its status as one of the finest deepwater harbors in Asia.⁶²

Furthermore, the recent death of the Vietnamese Communist Party's General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng and the appointment of Tô Lâm as his successor presents an opportunity for diplomatic inroads in the coming months.⁶³ While Nguyễn Phú Trọng presided over the relationship between the United States and Vietnam since 2011, with all of the developments that came of it, he was the leader of a conservative, Marxist-Leninist faction in Vietnamese politics that was nevertheless suspicious of the United States and fearful of "color revolutions."⁶⁴ His death marks the fading influence of this old guard in Vietnamese politics, and his replacement Tô Lâm has a reputation for pragmatism that would make him more willing to seek a stronger partnership with the United States.⁶⁵ Tô Lâm inherits a Vietnamese government that is dominated by security officials and lacking in economic experience.⁶⁶ It should be expected that Vietnam will seek external assistance to maintain and grow the momentum it has built in international commerce, with the United States well poised to grant Vietnam the help it needs. This is especially apparent in Vietnam's desire to gain market economy status from the U.S. Department of Commerce, which

recently declined to upgrade Vietnam's status from nonmarket economy but noted the positive direction it has taken in recent years.⁶⁷

At present, Vietnam's relationship with the United States only has potential for growth, contingent on continued U.S. overtures. It is worth noting that the United States' persistent support for Ukraine can serve as sign that perhaps the days of fair-weather friendship are over, provided that Ukraine can make progress against Russia.⁶⁸ From this conflict, Vietnam sees the value of deepening its relationship with the United States and being amenable to it, with the potential for the United States to provide Vietnam the support it needs in a future contingency. Vietnam has also expressed willingness to engage in human rights dialogue when the Biden administration reached out with plans for economic cooperation without broaching the topic of regime change or reform.⁶⁹ Taking avenues of nontraditional security cooperation could build the foundations of trust for Vietnam and the United States to engage in deeper traditional security cooperation.⁷⁰ In the near future, if China continues aggression in the South China Sea, or continues to incite Laos and Cambodia against Vietnam, sentiments in Vietnam will be more favorable to the United States.⁷¹ It will be up to the United States to capitalize on these opportunities to build a more secure Indo-Pacific with buy-in from the region. ■

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