



Between Two Giants: Vietnam's Dilemma

Written by Khanh Vu Duc

US Vietnam naval drills →

To the north is China and across the Pacific is the United States, two powers facing off. In the middle and no less a part of this confrontation is Vietnam.

Vietnam is bordered by Cambodia and Laos to the west and China to the north. To the south, its nearest neighbours are Brunei, Malaysia, and Singapore; and east across the South China Sea, one can find the Philippines. Vietnam has little reason to feel abandoned; yet, as Hanoi fights for possessions over the Paracel and Spratley Islands, it finds itself increasingly alone.



India and Russia have waded into the South China Sea despite Chinese protests; but neither India nor Russia is a particularly close friend of Vietnam, rather business partners. Vietnam, joined with the Philippines is not alone in defying China, but even this "front" is one born out of shared interest -their opposition to Chinese control of the entire South China Sea as laid out in the nine-dash map, and claims over the Spratley Islands.

If not India, Russia, or the Philippines, then who might Vietnam call a friend? The answer may be surprising, if not startling : enter the United States, former foe of the Communist Party of Vietnam on the battlefield. But is the US a friend or merely another strategic partner? More importantly, does the US view Vietnam as a friend or merely another strategic partner ?

Joint naval exercises are nothing new between Vietnam and the US. The exercise may also be seen as an extension of Washington's pivot to Asia-Pacific, along the lines of its deployment of 2500 Marines to Australia.

Making amends with a former foe

Holding on to past grievances is far from healthy behaviour. The Vietnam War, one of the most violent in the latter half of the 20th century, had a profound effect on the American psyche and its people; but no more was an effect felt than in the country in which the war was fought.

Following the long and bloody struggle, millions of refugees from the former US-backed South Vietnam (unified with the North to become today's Socialist Republic of Vietnam) fled their homeland, with many taking to the seas. And who can forget that image of desperate South Vietnamese civilians scrambling to a rooftop near the American embassy, struggling for a place on the last helicopter out of Saigon?

For years after the war, US foreign policy was always made with "not another Vietnam" in mind (one can also argue that mentality continues to persist). And for two decades after the war, diplomatic relations between the US and Vietnam were non-existent. Yet, since 1994, these two foes have moved forward in reconciling past differences.

Although the US and Vietnam are far from the best of friends, the warming relations between them have raised some concerns in China. Fears that the US is trying to contain China by allying with an old enemy are magnified by Washington's pivot to the Asia-Pacific region. That Vietnam is an historic enemy of China (and as such, perhaps does not require much incentive to make amends with the US to confront its northern neighbour over the South China Sea) does little to assuage Beijing's fears.

However, the question to Washington from observers is just how far the US is willing to go with Vietnam.

Vietnam is still a single-party state under the rule of the Communist Party. Its record on human rights is poor, to say the least. Human rights activists as well as politicians have opposed or questioned Washington's increasing business with Hanoi unless and until the latter undertakes much-needed reform. The warming of relations has particularly irked Vietnamese-Americans, who fear that the expansion of US trade with Vietnam is being conducted at the cost of human

rights. However, to their credit, the US has refused to sell arms to Vietnam until improvements are made in the areas of democratic and human rights.

Much can be said about the US's refusal to sell arms to Vietnam. Either the US is simply building on past diplomatic achievements and nothing more, or the US believes it can pressure Hanoi to undergo necessary political reform. In both cases, the current government in Vietnam, as it exists today, is seen as an obstacle to greater US-Vietnamese relations. For Vietnam to truly call on the US as a friend, it must first change.

Walking a fine line with China

Nevertheless, the strengthening of relations between the US and Vietnam cannot be overlooked; and when, in 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton suggested that the US was interested in resolving the South China Sea disputes, Hanoi celebrated. It had been the desire of Vietnam's leaders to see the disputes handled multilaterally. China, which has claimed all of the South China Sea and islands in the area, and desires to resolve the disputes on a bilateral basis with claimant states, opposes any kind of international intervention. Moreover, it regards Hanoi's attempt to internationalize the issue as threatening to Beijing's interests.

Vietnam is in a delicate position in which it must walk a fine line between opposing China and outright disobedience. Although relations between the US and Vietnam have improved, Hanoi does not have a mutual defense treaty to fall upon, unlike the Philippines. Having refused to sell arms to Vietnam, there is no guarantee that the US would rush to Vietnam's defense in the event of a war, especially a war fought against China.

To oppose China is one thing. However, to move openly against China is another. While Hanoi has maintained a balance between Beijing and Washington, all signs point to Hanoi moving closer to the West, not because they are ideologically similar, but because Vietnam cannot stand by itself in facing against China.

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, Vietnam cannot afford to burn any bridges with China. Its neighbour will forever be its neighbour, and it is not in Vietnam's best interest to have China as an outright enemy, if only because the threat of war is disastrous for all parties involved. Moderation and sound diplomacy are necessary for Vietnam to move forward with strengthening its relationship with the US while maintaining an air of polite opposition to China.

Changing for a new Vietnam

Presently, the current Vietnamese government appears to have little in the way of concrete direction. While the Communist Party has attempted to balance relations between China and the US, it has done so more out of a desire to remain in power rather than for the benefit of its citizens.

As said, the greatest obstacle to improving US-Vietnamese relations is the Communist Party itself, which is rightly criticised for its treatment of human rights and democratic activists. Unless necessary reform is undertaken, the US will continue to withhold the sale of arms so desired by Hanoi. This presents a dilemma for the Communist government, which has succeeded in inviting the US to the South China Sea disputes but failed to acquire weapons technologies.

However, if one assumes that Vietnam does change (including much needed political reform), where then does that leave a nation stuck between two giants? Success in acquiring US weapons will only fuel Beijing's paranoia that Vietnam is an agent of American foreign policy. Vietnam has the unenviable position of wanting to develop closer ties with the West while maintaining a productive relationship with China.

To do so, there must be a new Vietnam whose policies at home and abroad are for independence, freedom, democracy, peace, and neutrality. Ideally, Vietnam should not be seen as an agent of one country against another; rather, a democratic government of Vietnam should best reflect the hopes and aspirations of its people.

Vietnam's neutrality does not mean it will never take part in any foreign conflict. Instead, Vietnam must be free to decide how best to approach any situation in order to satisfy the needs of its citizens. It must not be forced to take part in a situation it has no desire to participate; however, this is more of a matter of governance than foreign policy. The government that captains a nation must do so responsibly and with integrity.

Ultimately, reform is necessary if Vietnam wishes to call the United States a friend. There is much to do, and unless the Communist Party of Vietnam carries out immediate change, it will find itself with another partner, of which it has many. What Vietnam lacks and desperately needs is someone to watch their back.

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