

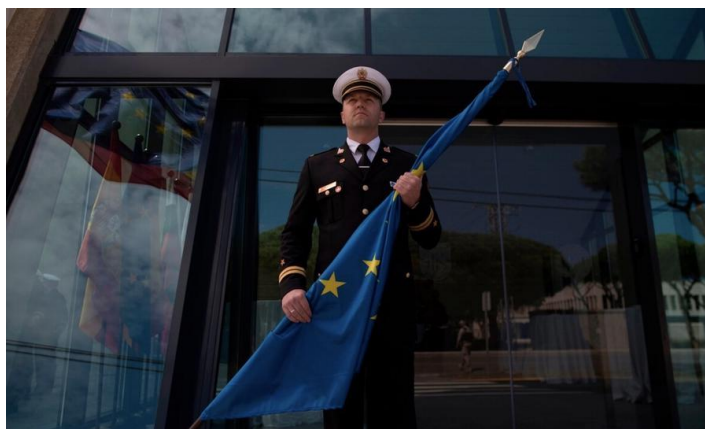


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EU, Vietnam to become brothers in arms

Two sides will sign a new defense agreement on August 5, opening the way for stronger strategic cooperation including in the South China Sea

By David Hutt



A military officer holds a European Union flag in a file photo. Photo: Facebook

On August 5, the European Union's (EU) chief diplomat Federica Mogherini will sign a new defense agreement with Vietnam, the first such security deal Brussels will have with a Southeast Asian nation. It is the latest indication that the EU is trying to forge a closer defense relationship with the region and Vietnam in particular, which is at the heart of disputes with China in the South China Sea.

After taking part in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum and an EU-ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference in Bangkok between August 1 and 2, Mogherini will head to Hanoi to sign "an agreement on Vietnam's participation in our European military and civilian missions", she told regional media earlier this week. "I expect it to be the first of many with our friends in ASEAN, because our missions do not only serve European interests, but serve first and foremost the interest of peace and security globally," added Mogherini, the EU's high representative for foreign affairs and security policy.

Alongside Vietnamese Defense Minister Ngo Xuan Lich, she is scheduled to sign a Framework Participation Agreement (FPA), which will make Vietnam part of the EU's crisis management operations, Asia Times confirmed with EU sources.

A FPA also allows a partner nation to contribute to the operations and missions under the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy, a strategy to coordinate the bloc's defense and intelligence policies.



EU Foreign Policy Chief Federica Mogherini speaks in Kuwait City, July 14, 2019. Photo: AFP

An EU spokesperson told Asia Times the agreement “confirms the EU’s and Vietnam’s shared commitment to contribute to peace and security in their neighborhoods and the wider world, as well as to safeguarding the rules-based multilateral order.”

“[It] will allow for Vietnam’s active participation in EU-led crisis management operations. These play a key role in peacekeeping, conflict prevention and strengthening international security in the EU’s immediate neighborhood and beyond,” the spokesperson added.

It will be the fourth FPA the EU has signed with an Asia-Pacific nation, after Australia, New Zealand and South Korea.

The deal comes as the EU’s relations with Vietnam are flourishing.

On June 30, the two sides finally signed a free trade agreement (FTA), almost four years after negotiations ended. It is the EU’s second trade deal with a Southeast Asian country, after it signed one with Singapore earlier this year. The European Commission called it “the most ambitious free trade deal ever concluded with a developing country.”

Hanoi reckons that because the trade deal will cut most tariffs on Vietnamese exports into the EU once the deal comes into effect, and eventually almost all duties after a few years, it could boost the country’s exports to the EU, worth \$42.5 billion last year, by up to 20%.

But security relations are also improving. In April, Jean-Christophe Belliard, deputy secretary-general of the European External Action Service, the EU’s foreign and defense ministry, visited Hanoi to meet with Deputy Defense Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh. Reports at the time indicated the two officials discussed a range of defense issues as well as the EU’s financial support for Vietnamese officers to attend EU courses and building Vietnam’s peacekeeping capabilities.

The following month, Vinh led a Vietnamese delegation to Brussels to attend an EU Chiefs of Defense meeting at the invitation of Claudio Graziano, chairman of the European Union Military Committee, the EU’s highest military body. Vietnam for the first time took part in a European Union Military Committee meeting last year.

Also in May, the first joint committee meeting under Vietnam and EU’s Comprehensive Partnership and Cooperation Framework Agreement, a deal signed in 2012 and which came into effect in 2016, was held. It was co-chaired by Vietnam’s deputy minister of foreign affairs, To Anh Dung, and Gunnar Wiegand, director for Asia and Pacific in the European External Action Service.



A Vietnamese military band performs at the Presidential Palace in Hanoi, November 12, 2017. Photo: AFP/Pool/Kham

The EU has good reason for prioritizing relations with Vietnam. It was one of five countries chosen in June to become non-permanent members of the UN Security Council for the next two years, which should give it more experience in international diplomacy.

Vietnam is also set to take on the chairmanship of the ASEAN bloc next year, as the chair rotates between member states annually. Strong relations with Hanoi could thus allow the EU to gain more leverage in Southeast Asian affairs.

More important, Vietnam is at Southeast Asia’s geo-strategic center, as it remains the only rival claimant that is vocally opposing Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea, the region’s most burning security issue.

Both US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi are also in Bangkok this week to try to entice Southeast Asian nations to their side of the divide. Many analysts believe that the US and China are now in a contest for spheres of influence in Southeast Asia.

The ASEAN Regional Forum comes just two weeks after the Wall Street Journal, quoting unnamed US officials, alleged that Cambodia had entered a deal to allow the Chinese military exclusive use of a domestic naval base, which if true would ratchet up regional concerns about Chinese expansionism. It also comes amid yet another standoff in the South China Sea, after a Chinese exploration ship along with two coastguard vessels stationed around the oil-rich Vanguard Bank, a feature Vietnam claims as its territory. China's threat of military action last year and in 2017 forced Vietnam to cancel planned oil exploration projects in the same area.

The EU has so far refused to openly take sides in the South China Sea disputes, though it does take the position that Beijing must respect international law based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The EU Global Strategy, published in June 2016, vows to “uphold freedom of navigation, stand firm on the respect for international law, including the Law of the Sea and its arbitration procedures, and encourage the peaceful settlement of maritime disputes.”

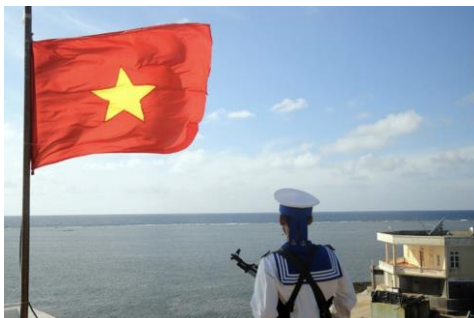


A French naval officer in front of the Vendémiaire frigate. Photo: Twitter

In April and May, EU and Vietnamese defense officials reportedly discussed the possibility of EU member states sending more vessels on freedom of navigation missions to the South China Sea. Indeed, the EU Maritime Security Strategy advocates for member states “to play a strategic role in providing global reach, flexibility and access” for the EU, and to “support the freedom of navigation and contribute to global governance by deterring, preventing and countering illicit activities.” “The EU is committed to maintaining a legal order for the seas and oceans based upon the principles of international law, as reflected notably in the [UNCLOS],” an EU spokesperson said in regard to the grouping’s position on the South China Sea. “This includes the maintenance of maritime safety, security, and cooperation, freedom of navigation and overflight.”

But only two member states currently engage in freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea: France and the United Kingdom. However, the UK is expected to leave the EU on October 31, depriving the bloc of its largest military power and leaving only France, a former colonizer of Vietnam, to perpetuate the policy in the region. France and Vietnam have improved security relations in recent years, signing a defense cooperation agreement back in 2009 and beginning a Defense Policy Dialogue in late 2016. The first Vietnam-France deputy ministerial dialogue on security and defense strategy took place last September, at which a Vietnam-France Joint Committee on Defense Cooperation was signed, setting out bilateral defense initiatives until 2028. This followed a visit to Paris by the Vietnamese Communist Party’s General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, the country’s leading statesman.

Apart from defense talks and agreements, France is also reportedly keen to take a defensive position in the South China Sea disputes, in which Vietnam is now the only claimant loudly protesting China’s annexation and militarization of parts of the maritime area. French vessels engaged in freedom of navigation exercises in the South China Sea in 2017 and last year, soon after an international arbitration panel at The Hague ruled in July 2016 that China’s wide-sweeping claims to the sea are illegitimate under international law. Beijing rejected the decision.



A Vietnamese soldier stands watch overlooking the South China Sea. Photo: Facebook

In May, the French destroyer *FS Forbin* docked in Vietnam, the first visit of its kind. At the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue, an annual regional defense dialogue held in Singapore in late May, French Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly promised that French vessels would “sail more than twice a year in the South China Sea” and continue upholding international law in a “steady, non-confrontational but obstinate way.”

Exactly what a Vietnam-EU FPA will mean in practical terms is unclear. At present, there are only Common Security and Defense Policy missions in Europe and Africa, and none in Asia. Arguably it will be more symbolic than substantive, at least at first.

The EU has held five EU-ASEAN High-Level Dialogue on Maritime Security Cooperation sessions since 2013, while it is currently co-chair of the ASEAN Regional Forum's Inter-sessional Meeting on Maritime Security, along with Vietnam and Australia. But the EU is angling to expand its security brief in Asia. For years, it has lobbied to gain a seat at the intimate ASEAN Defense Minister's Meeting (ADMM) Plus Experts' Working Group sessions, and the more grandiose annual East Asia Summits.

At this year's Shangri-La Dialogue conference, Mogherini said that when she made her first speech at the summit four years ago, she had stated the EU “had the ambition to be not only – as we are already – the key economic partner for Asia, but also to become a global security provider or a security partner, and Asia should have been part of that work.” Four years on, she said in May, “we have come a long way on this. Today we work more closely than ever with ASEAN, not only politically and economically, but also on security, including on the military level.”

“Once positioning itself as a ‘natural partner,’ Brussels has realized that if it wants to be taken seriously [in Southeast Asia], it cannot be through self-entitlement and empty political gestures, but rather concrete, practical actions that demonstrate its ability to bring about positive change,” wrote Eva Pejsova, a senior analyst at the European Union Institute for Security Studies, a think tank.

