



## **The current and future of Vietnam – US defense relations** by Lai Thai Binh

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Since the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1995, defense ties between Vietnam and the United States have been based on three pillars. The first is the overall positive framework of Vietnam-US relations, which created a favorable platform for the development of defense relations (especially with the establishment of the Comprehensive Partnership in July 2013). Second is a growing overlap of interests. Vietnam became one of the most important new partners of the US in the region with defense cooperation becoming more concrete and substantive as both countries pay more attention to stability and development in the region in the context of China's rise and the emergence of nontraditional security issues. And third, are areas of cooperation between the two countries that have constantly strengthened and expanded from bilateral to regional and international.

Assessing the regional strategic environment, both countries agreed on three points. First, peace, cooperation and development would be the major trends in international relations. Second, security issues in some areas would become more complicated. World wars or wars using weapons of mass destruction were less likely but local wars, such as armed conflicts between states or within countries due to ethnic or religious differences, territorial conflicts, and terrorism were still a threat. Third, the Asia-Pacific region remained a relatively stable area, with less likelihood of conflict although hot spots persisted. The two countries also shared the objectives of maintaining peace and stability to further development as well as the need to expand defense relations with other countries on the basis of respect for independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and support of international efforts to prevent and repel threats of armed conflict and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Both countries wanted to increase defense relations with other ASEAN countries and promote strategic dialogues via ASEAN forums.

Fundamental disagreements persisted, however. Again, three topics can be identified. First, the United States focused more resources on the fight against terrorism, while Vietnam assessed that it was a cause of insecurity, peace and stability in the region and the world. Second, the US promoted Western-style "democracy" as well as "free markets" as the basis for national security and strengthening defense cooperation. For its part, Vietnam consistently sought to protect the Party, the State and the Socialist regime from "peaceful revolution" or any conspiracies that caused instability from outside or within. Third, the United States pursued a global defense strategy as Vietnam was very careful in dealing with global matters. The

US has focused on building and reinforcing relations with allies and partners to create a network of strategic relations but Vietnam advocated expanding military relations with all countries on the basis of respecting independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.

Defense ties between Vietnam and the US have developed positively in the last 20 years. The two countries established a legal basis for deepening defense ties with the signing of the 2011 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on five priority areas of defense cooperation as well as some other agreements on military training and dialogue mechanisms. The conduct of common activities such as exercises, US Navy ships visiting Vietnamese ports, visits by top defense officials of each country to the other, close coordination within the framework of ADMM+, the joint search for POW/MIA cases, demining cooperation, as well as Vietnam's declaration of joining PSI in May 2014 all helped to consolidate ties. The two sides continue to discuss and explore ways to further defense capacity building in Vietnam. However, those differences have restricted bilateral defense cooperation as has the fact that the US maintains elements of its arms embargo against Vietnam. The embargo, together with the complexity and high-cost US weapon systems, the long process of approval, and the fear of debates on "human right" issues in the US Congress... resulted in a poor record of US sales of modern weapon systems to Vietnam.

## **The future of Vietnam – US defense relations**

There will be favorable conditions from 2016 to 2020 that should allow the two countries to increase defense cooperation. In a multipolar world, security threats are becoming more complex, while the regional security architecture is not strong enough to respond, which obliges regional countries to accelerate international cooperation, including defense ties. The United States continues to be the most powerful nation in the world, with growing ties to the Asia-Pacific region that focus on increased cooperation with allies and new partners in smarter ways. As a result, there will be new and flexible forms and ways of cooperation at all levels. Relations between Vietnam and the US will intensify as the two countries solidify the framework of their Comprehensive Partnership.

Vietnam will play a growing role in US strategic calculations in the process of adjusting the "rebalance" strategy and the two countries will continue to focus on international cooperation including defense ties because there is a convergence of strategic interests in handling the South China Sea (a regional problem that is becoming worse at a pace that no country could imagine) and many nontraditional security issues. Such cooperation receives support from other countries in the region, including other ASEAN countries. In a recent interview in Laos, Secretary of State John Kerry said

that the prime minister of Laos “was very clear that he wants a unified ASEAN and he wants maritime rights protected, and he wants to avoid militarization and avoid the conflict.”

Some issues can slow the process of bilateral defense cooperation, too. These include the complexity of US domestic politics, the legacies of war, and especially the caution on both sides as they advance defense ties. Both countries respect relations with China and other Asia-Pacific countries; therefore, while there are regional hot spots and concerns about a new arms race, Vietnam and the US need to assure regional countries that progress in the defense relations between the two should contribute to development and peace in the region, and won't increase instability or worsen the regional strategic environment. Many international and regional security issues are complicated and have no clear-cut solutions in the short term; Vietnam and the US, therefore, need to be careful in promoting defense ties that are related to those issues. Finally, Vietnam also hesitates to push forward defense initiatives or cooperation that leads to ambiguity in explaining international law or causes fear about violating national sovereignty or unity.

To further promote defense ties between Vietnam and the US, the two countries should take several steps. First, they should increase bilateral defense cooperation to address regional problems, such as strengthening regional architecture, South China Sea tensions, and enhancing peacekeeping as well as space and network security cooperation. Second, they should continue to consolidate the framework of defense cooperation that's commensurate with the Comprehensive Partnership, especially adjusting or upgrading the 2011 MOU to give it a more strategic joint vision, more principles for advancing defense relations and/or more specific projects of defense cooperation (those projects should come from the five priority areas of cooperation specified in the new MOU). Third, they should attach more importance to promoting cooperation to build defense capacities for both sides, including asymmetric advantages, as Vietnam and the US face more diverse security challenges in the region in the long term.

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