



Key Findings

Dialogue on United States-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

**Hanoi Sheraton Hotel
September 12, 2024**

The Pacific Forum, in cooperation with the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, conducted a workshop on the current status and prospects for future developments of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the United States and Vietnam. Approximately 35 scholars and officials participated, all in their private capacity. The off-the-record discussions provided an opportunity to discuss key issues affecting strategic relations in Southeast Asia and the prospects for utilizing the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership as a vehicle for promoting stronger bilateral relations and improving regional security cooperation in the context of strategic competition and the threat of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in Asia. Key findings from this meeting include:

As the dialogue was held near the first anniversary of the establishment of the comprehensive strategic partnership between the United States and Vietnam both sides agreed that the partnership has been a key milestone for both countries and signifies a deepening of cooperation between the two countries. Public perception of the United States among Vietnamese was characterized and being especially favorable. Specifically, presentations highlighted increased collaboration on economic security, a shared commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific region, with a focus on maintaining peace and stability, and continued efforts to expand trade and investment ties, creating favorable conditions for businesses in both countries.

Vietnam's strategic narrative throughout the discussion was that by cultivating diverse and deeper diplomatic ties and being a responsible member of the international community, Vietnam can attain rapid yet sustainable development while safeguarding peace, security, and independence. This narrative reflects Vietnam's understanding of an increasingly volatile international landscape. By emphasizing independence, multilateralism, and technological innovation, Vietnam seeks to balance major power dynamics while aligning with priorities such as sustainable development, inclusivity, and climate change mitigation.

Several participants noted that there is a general concern among Vietnamese officials regarding US commitment to regional economic development. One analyst argued that the United States should "do more, faster" on economic engagement and focus less on its bilateral security competition with China. In this context, several participants expressed skepticism over the sustainability of the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). Others argued that the

United States had fallen behind China in promoting security cooperation related to the Mekong River basin. A specific issue cited was the lack of continuity among recent US administrations on both economic engagement and Mekong related initiatives.

There is a fundamental gap between the United States and Vietnam regarding the threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation in Southeast Asia. While US analysts warned that China's rapid expansion of its nuclear arsenal and the deployment of nuclear-capable submarines in the South China Sea as a threat to Vietnam's security, Vietnamese analysts argued that Vietnam is less concerned with China using nuclear weapons to threaten Vietnam or other ASEAN states, but more concerned about the threat of a nuclear confrontation between China and United States destabilizing the region.

The gap in the WMD threat perception has led to different conclusions about the future regional security environment. For US analysts, the emerging threat is centered around the potential for China using the South China Sea as a bastion for its nuclear armed submarine fleet and using its nuclear capabilities to coerce ASEAN states. Meanwhile, a Vietnamese participant argued that they saw AUKUS and other US-led minilateral security arrangements as more destabilizing than the expansion of China's nuclear arsenal. Others did express concern over China's lack of transparency regarding the expansion of its nuclear arsenal. One participant concluded that there is an urgent need for the United States and China to initiate an arms control mechanisms to reduce the risk of further escalation of a nuclear confrontation in the region.

There was general agreement that US-China competition will be a major determinant in shaping relationships in Southeast Asia for the foreseeable future. Both sides recognize that the competition is multifaceted and pervasive. While China focused on its proximity and economic engagement, the United States has sought to promote security cooperation centered around its formal alliance relationships. For Vietnam, the primary challenge has been to promote bilateral ties with both sides while using multilateral engagement to minimize the appearance of choose one over the other. For the United States, the primary focus for the past several years has been to seek ways to promote defense cooperation by creating a latticework of relationships that enable its allies and partners to collaborate under the premise of like-minded partnerships.

In the context of a discussion on the desire to avoid choosing sides in the US-China strategic competition, the role of ASEAN in enabling strategic autonomy for its member states was highlighted by several Vietnamese participants. Some argued that it provided an important venue for establishing region-wide rules and norms while others argued that the organization offered regional states agency to minimize the effects of the strategic competition on the region. Nevertheless, there remains a great deal of skepticism regarding ASEAN's capacity to actively enable a meaningful discourse on arms control or nuclear risk reduction framework in the region.

Vietnam remains strongly committed to promoting WMD nonproliferation, especially as it resumes its interest in further development of its civil nuclear program. As part of its earlier effort to integrate nuclear power into its energy mix, Vietnam has signed and ratified key multilateral nonproliferation and nuclear security treaties and agreements. Nevertheless, it was also recognized that new technologies such as small modular reactors, the persistent trend of nuclear smuggling in Southeast Asia, the emergence of biosecurity threats, and growth in dual and omni-use

technologies require ongoing attention to enhanced efforts and developing effective trade control mechanisms and active participation in all nonproliferation regimes.

This document was prepared by Carl Baker (carl@pacforum.org). These preliminary findings provide a general summary of the discussion. This is not a consensus document, and the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of all participants.