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VIETNAM HAS UPGRADED TIES WITH THE UNITED STATES TO A 'COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP'.

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Introduction

The US-Vietnam relationship has entered a new diplomatic phase. Ties between both countries greatly strengthened following the G20 Summit in New Delhi, as the US President Joseph Biden was received in Hanoi by Nguyen Phu Trong, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Central Committee (The White House, 2023). During the summit, both leaders agreed to upgrade the US-Vietnam relationship to the status of a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' (CSP) (Tatarski, 2023). As proclaimed jointly by the two leaders, this new status contributes to peace, cooperation, and prosperity (The White House, 2023).

The signing of the CSP between the United States and Vietnam, the highest diplomatic level awarded by Vietnam, represents a fifty years' history of strengthening bilateral relations after the end of the Vietnam War (Wells-Dang, 2023). With the end of the post-war embargo on Vietnam in 1991 and the re-establishment of commercial relations, Washington chose to gradually normalise bilateral relations with Hanoi (The White House, 2023). Moreover, the signing of the 2013 'Comprehensive Partnership', which happened during the Obama Presidency, and the annulment of the arms embargo on Vietnam in 2016 led to the normalisation of the diplomatic relationship between both (Hong Nguyen, 2023). Considering the new episode for the United States-Vietnam relationship, this Info Flash will overview the events surrounding the recently signed CSP and analyse whether it could imply a change in Vietnam's foreign policy.

The Expansion of Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships

As a diplomatic status, the CSP could be understood as a symbol that shows Vietnam's deep relationship with another country. This is due to it being the highest of Vietnam's three awarded diplomatic levels (Tatarski, 2023). The only two countries recognized with a more special relationship category are Cambodia and Laos (Tatarski, 2023). Thus, with this new partnership, Vietnam granted the US the same diplomatic level as China and Russia, the first countries to ever acquire CSP status (Wells-Dang, 2023). India and South Korea followed these (Wells-Dang, 2023), which acquired this category in 2016 (Ao, 2020) and 2022, respectively (Ah, 2022). Hanoi has also shown interest in expanding its network of CSPs with Indonesia, Australia, Singapore, and Japan (Palma et al., 2023), all of them close allies to the US in the Indo-Pacific (Wells-Dang, 2023).

These diplomatic moves took place despite Vietnam's concerns about them potentially harming its relationship with China (Palma et al., 2023). However, according to Dr Le Dang Doanh from the Central Institute for Economic Management (CIEM), this act of establishing a CSP with the US should not be seen as 'unusual' (Pham & Murray, 2023). Indeed, this comes after Vietnam had already signed CSPs with four out of five of the permanent members of the UN Security Council (Pham & Murray, 2023), the US being the last one to achieve it.

US-Vietnam Opportunity to Enhance Collaboration

Through the signing of the CSP, both countries stressed their increasing collaboration in many fields, such as trade, rare minerals, security, and climate change (The White House, 2023). On the one hand, the US Administration announced several initiatives and business deals intending to strengthen economic ties with Vietnam (Tatarski, 2023). Indeed, Vietnamese development over the last decade attracted the investments of many big US tech companies like Google, Microsoft, and Apple (Bicker, 2023), which has led them to relocate part of their supply chain to the country (Bicker, 2023).

Beyond the previous sections, the CSP also includes a semiconductor partnership 'to expand the capacity of the semiconductor ecosystem in Vietnam' (Tatarski, 2023) and an agreement on rare earth minerals (The White House, 2023). The latter is particularly relevant, as Vietnam has the world's largest rare earth mineral deposits after China (NEWS WIRES, 2023). Some view such political moves as an effort from the US to diversify its supply chains of these critical components (NEWS WIRES, 2023), essential in manufacturing many technological devices (NEWS WIRES, 2023). Finally, both nations wanted to strengthen bi-lateral military ties (Kurlantzick & McGowan, 2023).

CSP: An Answer to China's Reclamations in The South China Sea

While US officials publicly argued that President Biden's trip to Southeast Asia, first to attend the G20 Summit in New Delhi and later to Hanoi, was aimed at promoting collaboration among allies on climate change, development, and regarding the evolving global economy, many suggested another motive in private (Kurlantzick & McGowan, 2023). Indeed, some even declared that strengthening the relationship with both countries 'would boost America's position in the Indo-Pacific region' (Kurlantzick & McGowan, 2023). Likewise, President Biden stated that his visit was part of an effort to show to 'our Indo-Pacific partners and to the world, the United States is a Pacific nation and we're not going anywhere' (Bose, et al., 2023).

The US move to strengthen its relationship with Vietnam certainly has strategic timing. Over the last few years, many countries in Southeast Asia, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei, have been protesting China's territorial claims in the South China Sea (Kine & Lau, 2023). As a response to these claims, many of them decided to develop a closer relationship with Washington (Palma et al., 2023). For instance, the AUKUS pact (NEWS WIRES, 2023), in addition to the US gaining access to four other military bases in the Philippines (Palma et al., 2023), are seen by many as examples of this new approach.

FIGURE I. The territories in dispute in the South China Sea represented under the 'Nine-dash Line'.



Source: What is the South China Sea Dispute? (2023, July 7). BBC News.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-13748349>

Even though the US President has stated that his policy of strengthening US ties with China's neighbours does not aim at 'containing China' (Kurlantzick & McGowan, 2023), Beijing appeared unsatisfied. Indeed, China's foreign ministry spokesperson, Mao Ning, 'recommended' the US to dispose of its 'hegemonic and Cold War mentality' (Tung Le, 2023).

Vietnam's Foreign Policy

Despite the relevant progress made by Washington, Vietnam will not abandon its 'multidirectional' foreign policy (Kurlantzick & McGowan, 2023). Thus, although the CSP is an example of how the interests of both countries increasingly align, it is not expected that Vietnam will cast aside its partnership with China or Russia, which are its historical partners (Kurlantzick & McGowan, 2023).

Currently, China is Hanoi's primary trading partner, with a trading volume of \$177.3 billion (Tran, 2023). The strong economic ties between the two communist countries show the US exactly how strong the ties remain between them. In the case of Russia, despite its aggression towards Ukraine, Vietnam still maintained a strong diplomatic relationship with Moscow. Indeed, on 21 May 2023, Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Chairman of the Security Council, made a working visit to Hanoi to discuss the expansion of trade and humanitarian collaboration (Medvedev arrives in Hanoi, 2023). Likewise, Vietnam has avoided condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine in abstaining from the many resolutions submitted to the UN Assembly on the matter (Vu, 2023). There have also been contacts between officials for the sale of heavy weaponry to Hanoi (Bose, et al., 2023).

According to these strong ties with their historical partners, the new US-Vietnam CSP will not be enough to state that Vietnam is allied with the US against Beijing (Wells-Dang, 2023). Vietnam, like the rest of Southeast Asian countries, would rather remain 'neutral' (Kurlantzick & McGowan, 2023) than choose a side in the competition between Washington and Beijing aimed at becoming the dominant power in the Indo-Pacific region. However, Vietnam's shift is rightly viewed by many as an endeavour to 'show the world, including China, that it has an omnidirectional and independent foreign policy beholden to no country' (Pham & Murray, 2023).

Conclusion

The new partnership between the United States and Vietnam has become a clear example of how the diplomatic ties between the two countries recovered after their tragic conflict in the past. Beyond reconstructing their bilateral relationship, broken in 1975, this move has relevant geopolitical implications, as it shows how the US has no intentions to allow China to become the leading power in the Indo-Pacific.

Indeed, in the current US-China rivalry for global hegemony, Beijing's latest actions in the South China Sea have helped the US to strengthen ties with some Southeast Asian countries that do not support China's claims. Taking full advantage of China continuously advancing its territorial claims, it is most probable that the US will try to increase its presence in the region and strengthen its ties with 'China's backyard'.

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