

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63332/joph.v5i3.908>

Luring the Dragon’s Neighbor: the Biden Administration’s Strategies to Engage Vietnam against an Ambitious China

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Abstract

Amid the intensifying US-China strategic rivalry, the Biden administration has placed significant emphasis on strengthening key partnerships within the Indo-Pacific. Central to this strategic recalibration is Vietnam, a nation once considered a challenger, now emerging as a critical player in Washington’s regional strategy. This paper seeks to unpack the complexities of US engagement with Hanoi, analyzing three pivotal policy domains—politics and diplomacy, security and defense, and economics and trade—through which the US aims to deeply integrate Vietnam into its regional framework and counterbalance China’s growing influence. The analysis explores both the concrete advances and the more subtle shifts currently unfolding in this bilateral relationship. Over time, Vietnam has incrementally moved closer to the US, signaling a significant transformation in its foreign policy. Despite the Biden administration’s efforts to enhance the appeal of bilateral ties, Vietnam remains cautious and carefully weighs its steps in advancing relations with the US.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, Strategic Competition, Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, Counterbalance, Strategic Trust.

Introduction

The Intensification of US-China Rivalry: Strategic Implications under the Biden Administration

In recent years, the relationship between the US and China has experienced a marked deterioration, transitioning from tentative engagement to entrenched rivalry (Bano & Roberts, 2023). This shift signals the emergence of a fierce competition that reflects profound structural changes in global politics. Since the Trump administration, the US has formally identified China as its foremost strategic competitor, a designation that has been embraced and expanded by the Biden administration (Nathan, 2021; He & Feng, 2022; Winkler, 2023).

The Biden administration explicitly acknowledged the challenge posed by China’s rapid ascension, which is driven by its ambitions to expand its economic, military, and technological capabilities (Satoru, 2021). President Biden consistently articulated his administration’s commitment to ensuring that China does not surpass the US leadership on the global stage. Notably, he framed China as a “serious competitor”, emphasizing the need for strategic vigilance in responding to Beijing’s rise. This framing underscores a continuation of bipartisan consensus in Washington regarding the perception of China as a systemic rival.

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This sentiment was further amplified by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during his speech at George Washington University, where he highlighted the urgency of addressing China's unrelenting push for global influence. The Biden administration's unwavering resolve reflects a broader strategy to safeguard America's leadership role in an increasingly multipolar world (Wei & Zhang, 2021). He depicted China as "the most serious long-term challenge to international order" (Dan Tri, 2022). Blinken underscored the unique position of China as "the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system". This assessment aligns with the administration's broader strategic imperative to "hold countries like China to account" for their actions on the global stage (The White House, 2021).

The Biden administration's official documents further solidified this strategic posture. The Interim National Security Strategic Guidance categorized China as "the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system". Similarly, the 2021 Annual Threat Assessment explicitly identified China as a "near-peer competitor" that challenges US dominance across multiple arenas, including economic, military, and technological domains. These assessments mark a significant departure from previous US policies, as they formally institutionalize the recognition of China as a near-peer rival for the first time in official government documentation (Wei & Zhang, 2021).

This recalibrated strategic outlook garnered robust bipartisan support in Congress, which coalesced around a unified approach to addressing the challenges posed by China. The enactment of the Strategic Competition Act of 2021 exemplified this consensus, providing a comprehensive framework for US policy toward Beijing. This legislation encompasses a wide array of initiatives, including diplomatic strategies, military deployments, and value-based competition, all aimed at countering China's growing global economic influence.

To operationalize its response to China's rise, the Biden administration articulated a comprehensive strategy often referred to as the "Biden Doctrine" (Kim, 2023). This strategy was anchored on three interconnected pillars: strengthening alliances, reinforcing multilateralism, and reducing strategic risks. Of these, alliances constitute the cornerstone, reflecting a concerted effort to rejuvenate traditional partnerships and build new coalitions to address shared challenges posed by China (Nobukatsu, 2021; Kim, 2023; Wesley & Finin, 2021).

Promoting Democratic Values and Human Rights

A defining characteristic of the Biden administration's foreign policy is its steadfast commitment to promoting democratic values and human rights (Vrbovský, Nečas, Liptáková & Drocárová, 2024). By intensifying criticism of China on sensitive issues such as Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet, the administration sought to galvanize international support among like-minded nations to counter authoritarianism. These efforts are rooted in a broader strategy to safeguard fundamental freedoms, uphold the rule of law, and push back against the growing influence of autocratic regimes on the global stage.

Advancing Technological and Economic Competitiveness

Building upon initiatives introduced during the Trump administration, the Biden administration significantly amplified efforts to enhance economic resilience and maintain technological leadership. Central to this approach are measures such as tightening export controls on high-tech

and strategically significant products destined for China and implementing landmark legislation, including the American Competitiveness and Manufacturing Act (CHIPS Act) (Schoenbaum, 2023). These initiatives aimed to strengthen domestic manufacturing capacity, address supply chain vulnerabilities, and secure the US's competitive advantage in critical sectors such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and clean energy (Reeves, 2024).

Bolstering Military and Security Presence in the Indo-Pacific

The Biden administration intensified its military engagement in the Indo-Pacific, a region central to its strategic priorities (Wei, 2022). This involves expanding joint military exercises with allies and partners and strengthening defense alliances, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). In contrast to the Trump administration, which frequently questioned the utility of alliances, the Biden administration reaffirmed US leadership in global partnerships. By revitalizing traditional alliances with NATO, the European Union, and key Asian partners, including Japan, South Korea, and Australia, Washington demonstrated its commitment to multilateral cooperation. Additionally, the administration pursued the establishment of new partnerships, signaling its determination to build a robust coalition capable of countering Beijing's ambitions.

Within this constellation of strategic relationships, Vietnam has emerged as a pivotal partner in Southeast Asia. With its strategic location in the South China Sea and steadfast commitment to defending its territorial sovereignty, Vietnam has become a cornerstone of Washington's strategy to counterbalance China's growing assertiveness. The US-Vietnam partnership has deepened across various domains, including economics, trade, security, and defense, underscoring the country's growing importance in America's Indo-Pacific strategy.

This paper seeks to analyze the Biden administration's strategic initiatives to strengthen ties with Vietnam as part of its broader effort to address China's rising influence. By examining the evolving US-Vietnam partnership, this study aims to shed light on Vietnam's critical role in America's global strategy and critically evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives in mitigating the multifaceted challenges posed by China.

Vietnam: The Linchpin in Biden's Foreign Policy to Counter China

The strategic importance of Vietnam in the US's global strategy has grown substantially since the Obama administration. A pivotal driver of this deepening relationship is the shared concern over China's rising power and its increasingly assertive actions in the South China Sea (Quyet & Nguyet, 2023). US efforts to recalibrate its approach toward Vietnam have been significantly influenced by this "China factor", fostering growing strategic trust between the two countries (Tung, 2022). This trust was notably cultivated during the Obama administration, a period in which Biden served as vice president. Vietnam's prominence in US foreign policy was further elevated during the Trump administration, as reflected in its inclusion in key strategic documents such as the 2017 *US National Security Strategy*, the 2018 *US National Defense Strategy*, and the 2019 *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*.

Under the Biden administration, Vietnam's role in US strategic calculations continued to expand. As efforts to bolster alliance cohesion and forge new partnerships intensify, Vietnam has emerged as a key regional player. The 2021 *Interim National Security Strategy Guidance* explicitly underscores the US's commitment to "redoubling" its efforts to foster closer ties with Vietnam (The White House, 2021). Similarly, the 2022 *Indo-Pacific Strategy* identifies Vietnam

as a “leading regional partner”, grouping it alongside India, New Zealand, Taiwan, and other key allies (The White House (2022)).

President Biden consistently reinforced Vietnam’s importance in US foreign policy. He described Vietnam as “an important country in the world and in the region” and affirmed its status as “a key partner in the Indo-Pacific region” (Bao Chinh Phu, 2023). Biden once asserted that: “America is a Pacific country, and we are not going anywhere” (Reuters, 2023). This encapsulates the administration’s broader commitment to sustained engagement in the Indo-Pacific and its recognition of Vietnam as a cornerstone of this strategy.

Vietnam is Engaged in A Territorial Dispute with China Over Sovereignty in the South China Sea.

A critical factor underpinning the US’s alignment with Vietnam in countering China is Vietnam’s direct and determined opposition to China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea. Among the few nations that actively contest Beijing’s expansive assertions, Vietnam stands out as the most vocal and resolute challenger. In response to China’s aggressive actions in the South China Sea, Vietnam has implemented a range of strategies to safeguard its sovereignty and counteract Beijing’s assertiveness. This convergence of strategic interests between the US and Vietnam provides a strong foundation for their deepening partnership.

The US and Vietnam share several critical objectives in the South China Sea, including the defense of freedom of navigation and overflight, the peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international law, and the preservation of regional stability (Sangtam, 2021). As China’s neighbor and the most experienced military force in Southeast Asia, Vietnam represents a pivotal partner for the US in its broader strategy to counterbalance Beijing’s growing influence (Tung, 2022). Strengthening ties with Vietnam enhances Washington’s ability to shift the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, reinforcing its position in the ongoing great power rivalry with China (RFI, 2023).

Recognizing Vietnam’s pivotal role in the region, senior US officials underscored its importance in shaping the future of Asia. Kurt Campbell, Indo-Pacific Coordinator for the US National Security Council, highlighted Vietnam’s significant influence in regional affairs, while Daniel Kritenbrink, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific, reaffirmed the US’s commitment to enhancing Vietnam’s maritime security capabilities (Tien Phong, 2022). Kritenbrink emphasized US efforts to “do everything possible” to promote maritime awareness and security, noting Vietnam’s inclusion as one of seven nations benefiting from training and assistance under the Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative (Tuoi Tre, 2022). Through close collaboration with the Vietnam Coast Guard, the US aimed to bolster Vietnam’s capacity to monitor and respond to maritime activities, further solidifying the partnership between the two nations. This strategic alignment between the US and Vietnam reflects a shared vision for a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific and a commitment to countering China’s ambitions through enhanced cooperation and mutual support.

Vietnam is An Emerging Economic Power in the Region

Over the past decade, Vietnam has emerged as one of Southeast Asia’s fastest-growing economies, characterized by consistent GDP growth and comprehensive economic reforms (Nguyen, 2022). Notably, Vietnam has positioned itself as a key player in global supply chains, particularly within the manufacturing and high-tech sectors. This evolution has elevated

Vietnam's status as a potential alternative partner for the US, especially as Washington seeks to reduce its dependence on China in critical supply chains.

In the context of intensifying US-China trade tensions, Vietnam's strategic importance has grown considerably. As the trade conflict compels multinational companies to diversify their supply networks away from China, American businesses increasingly view Vietnam as a viable economic partner. This trend is reinforced by the declining optimism of US firms regarding the Chinese market. Recent surveys reveal that many American business leaders aimed to scale back their operations in China and redirect investments to alternative destinations, including Vietnam (Reuters, 2023).

A survey conducted by the US-China Business Council underscored this shift, with a record number of US companies reporting reductions or complete cessation of investments in China. In the Council's annual survey, over one-third of respondents indicated they decreased or stopped investing in China over the past year—a significant increase from the 22% reported in 2022. The majority of these respondents represent large American multinational corporations (VnExpress, 2023).

Initially, this movement away from China was limited in scale, beginning during the Trump administration's trade war with China. At that time, manufacturers sought to relocate their supply chains to avoid US import tariffs on Chinese goods. However, this trend accelerated and became more widespread under the Biden administration as US-China trade relations further deteriorated. Vietnam's emergence as a preferred destination for American businesses reflects its growing economic potential and its role as a critical partner in efforts to diversify global supply chains.

Vietnam Has the Potential to Participate in the US Semiconductor Supply Chain

Vietnam has the potential to become a critical partner for the US in the semiconductor supply chain, a sector of strategic importance to Washington. One of Vietnam's key advantages lies in its substantial reserves of rare earth minerals, essential raw materials for manufacturing semiconductors and other advanced technologies. While the US also possesses significant rare earth reserves, stringent environmental regulations have limited their domestic extraction. Consequently, the US remains heavily reliant on China for rare earth supplies. As strategic competition between the US and China intensifies, reducing this dependence has become a national priority. Collaborating with Vietnam offers an opportunity to diversify rare earth supply chains, thereby mitigating risks associated with reliance on a single source.

Vietnam's rare earth reserves is estimated at 22 million tons (Vietnam Briefing, 2023). It represents a substantial portion of the global total of 120 million tons, according to the US Geological Survey (Vietnam Briefing, 2023). By comparison, China possesses over 44 million tons, accounting for approximately 34% of global reserves (Vietnam Briefing, 2023). Despite its substantial reserves, US production of rare earths remains constrained by environmental policies, allowing China to maintain its dominance in this sector. Historically, China exploited its near-monopoly on rare earths as a strategic tool in trade. For instance, in 2019, Beijing imposed restrictions on rare earth exports, significantly disrupting US semiconductor and defense industries (GIS Reports Online, 2019). This incident underscored the urgency for the US to secure alternative sources of rare earth minerals.

To address this vulnerability, Washington has implemented measures to reduce reliance on China in critical technology sectors. One example is the US Department of Commerce's swift

response to China's export restrictions, which included strategies to diversify rare earth supply chains. Additionally, restrictions on the export of advanced chip manufacturing equipment to China, aimed at curbing Beijing's technological and military advancements, further highlight the US's focus on safeguarding its semiconductor industry. These restrictions prevent American companies from supplying advanced chips to Chinese enterprises for use in applications such as supercomputers, artificial intelligence, nuclear weapons, and hypersonic warfare (CNN, 2023).

Given Vietnam's abundant rare earth resources and its growing role in the global semiconductor value chain, strengthening US-Vietnam collaboration could serve as a cornerstone in efforts to reduce reliance on China. Such a partnership not only supports the US's broader economic and strategic objectives but also enhances the resilience of global supply chains in an increasingly competitive geopolitical landscape.

Biden Administration's Policy Towards Vietnam

Strengthen Political And Diplomatic Relations

Upgrading relations with Vietnam

A landmark achievement in the Biden administration's foreign policy toward Vietnam is the remarkable elevation of diplomatic relations, advancing two levels within a decade. Initially established as a "Comprehensive Partnership" in 2013, the bilateral relationship reached the highest diplomatic tier of a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" by 2023. This significant progression underscores Washington's unwavering commitment to strengthening ties with Hanoi, positioning the relationship as a cornerstone of US regional diplomacy.

Since the start of President Biden's tenure, concerted efforts were made to realize this goal. During discussions with Vietnamese President Nguyen Xuan Phuc and Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin underscored the importance of elevating ties, advocating for a strategic partnership (Tuoi Tre, 2021). Similarly, Vice President Kamala Harris, during her historic visit to Vietnam, emphasized the urgency of deepening cooperation (RFI, 2021). US Ambassador to Vietnam Marc Knapper also prioritized this objective, making the elevation of the bilateral relationship a central focus of his diplomatic efforts (Nguoi Lao Dong, 2022).

These cumulative efforts culminated in President Biden's historic visit to Vietnam in 2023, during which the two nations officially elevated their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. This advancement reflects the deepening "strategic trust" between Washington and Hanoi, a concept embodying mutual confidence and a shared vision for the future. US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink described this trust as being at an "all-time high" (APnews, 2024). Former Vietnamese Ambassador Pham Quang Vinh similarly highlighted that this trust is not merely symbolic but serves as a foundation for sustained economic and security collaboration (Bao Quoc Te, 2023).

With this elevated status, the US joins Vietnam's closest strategic partners, including China and Russia. Beyond economic cooperation, this enhanced partnership further positions Vietnam as a central player in the US strategy to counterbalance China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific. By anchoring Vietnam's significance within its broader regional strategy, the US reinforced its commitment to fostering a stable, secure, and rules-based Indo-Pacific order.

*1272 Luring the Dragon's Neighbor: the Biden Administration's
Providing vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the US became a key partner for Vietnam, providing millions of vaccine doses and medical aid, helping the country manage the pandemic and initiate its recovery (Tung, 2022). The US became Vietnam's largest vaccine supplier, donating about 40 million doses, which significantly boosted the country's vaccination rates (Tuoi Tre, 2022). Additionally, the US deepened engagement through health security initiatives, including the establishment of a CDC regional office in Hanoi (Vietnam News, 2021) and \$44 million in pandemic-related assistance. (U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Vietnam, 2021). The US also helped Vietnam enhance its vaccine production capacity. Vietnamese President Nguyen Xuan Phuc hailed the US vaccine aid as crucial not only for public health but also for strengthening bilateral ties (Vietnam News, 2021). This initiative reflects the Biden administration's broader vaccine diplomacy, aimed at building trust, enhancing partnerships, and reinforcing US leadership in global health security (CSIS, 2021).

Mitigating human rights issues

Under the Biden administration, US-Vietnam dialogues saw a shift in addressing human rights, with a softer approach to avoid tensions that could harm the growing bilateral relationship. This strategy aligns with the Biden administration's broader distinction between authoritarian regimes based on their geopolitical alignments, assessing communist regimes like Vietnam differently from revisionist powers (CSIS, 2021).

The Biden administration's National Security Strategy categorized authoritarian states into two types: those with revisionist foreign policies that threaten US security, and those, like Vietnam, that, while authoritarian, support key democratic principles, such as freedom of navigation and adherence to international law, particularly in the South China Sea (Brookings, 2022).

The Biden administration's downplaying of human rights issues with Vietnam led to criticism from international human rights organizations. They believed that the US was sacrificing human rights values for strategic interests. According to human rights groups, news about Biden's visit to Hanoi contained over 2,600 words, but only 112 addressed human rights problems (The Japan Times, 2023). Carolyn Nash, Asia advocacy director at Amnesty International, stated: "The Biden administration is clearly setting aside human rights to promote partnerships with strategically important governments, sends a message that the US is willing to accept blatant failures to protect and uphold human rights" (Reuters, 2022).

Derek Grossman from the RAND Corporation noted that the Biden administration's primary aim was to integrate Vietnam into the US Indo-Pacific strategy, especially as a counterbalance to China and its rising assertiveness. He underscored that the US required "more friendships, greater collaboration, and stronger alliances" to effectively confront the challenge (Reuters, 2022). He also cautioned that while this strategy advances US goals, it may embolden other nations to disregard human rights without facing consequences.

This approach reflects Washington's understanding of Vietnam's divergent strategic priorities and the need to avoid destabilizing the growing partnership by focusing too heavily on human rights. Instead, the US was strengthening cooperation in other areas, especially to address the intensifying competition with China, while balancing global diplomacy and human rights concerns.

No criticism on Vietnam for abstaining from the UN resolution condemning Russia

Vietnam's decision to abstain from voting on the United Nations resolution condemning Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reflects the country's long-standing diplomatic strategy of neutrality and cautious balancing. Despite the widespread international condemnation of Russia's actions, particularly from Western powers like the US, Vietnam opted not to take a definitive stance. This decision, which diverged sharply from Washington's unequivocal denunciation of Moscow, did not lead to any significant diplomatic fallout. In fact, the Biden administration refrained from publicly criticizing Vietnam, instead continuing to strengthen the US-Vietnam relationship, which culminated in the historic upgrade of bilateral ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

From Washington's perspective, Vietnam's abstention on the Ukraine issue was of relatively minor importance compared to its strategic support for US initiatives in the Indo-Pacific region. The central value of Vietnam's partnership lied in its cooperation with the US to counter China's expanding influence, a priority that significantly outweighs disagreements over Ukraine. Furthermore, the Biden administration wisely avoided pressuring Vietnam to choose sides, recognizing the necessity of respecting Hanoi's independent foreign policy priorities. For Vietnam, the priority remained the preservation of a peaceful and stable regional environment, with an emphasis on strategic autonomy. Any overt attempt by the US to compel Vietnam to align more closely with its position on global issues could jeopardize the trust that was carefully cultivated over time. By choosing not to criticize Vietnam's stance on Ukraine, the Biden administration maintained the diplomatic flexibility necessary to safeguard the evolving partnership, ensuring that it remained grounded in mutual respect and shared strategic objectives.

This pragmatic approach underscores the US's recognition of Vietnam's sovereign decisions and its broader geopolitical interests. It reflects a sophisticated understanding of the complexities of regional diplomacy, where patient engagement and careful management of sensitive issues are crucial for advancing long-term cooperation. By prioritizing the broader strategic relationship over isolated disagreements, Washington has fostered an environment of stability and trust, positioning the US-Vietnam partnership as a cornerstone of the Indo-Pacific strategy.

Strengthening Military and Defense Relations

Supporting Vietnam in the South China Sea

The Biden administration consistently demonstrated strong support for Vietnam in its ongoing disputes in the South China Sea. The US firmly condemned China's unfounded sovereignty claims and militarization in the region, emphasizing its commitment to upholding international law and maintaining regional stability. The US advocated for the peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with the principles set forth in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), a framework established between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

In line with this stance, Secretary of State Antony Blinken reiterated the South China Sea policy established during the Trump administration, which explicitly rejected China's expansive claims in the region. Blinken underscored the critical importance of the rules-based maritime order, noting that "there is no place where the rules-based maritime order is more under siege than in the South China Sea". He further accused Beijing of employing "coercion and intimidation" against Southeast Asian coastal states, actions that threaten the freedom of navigation through this crucial global shipping route (Tuoi Tre, 2021).

1274 Luring the Dragon's Neighbor: the Biden Administration's

By taking a firm position on South China Sea issues and offering both diplomatic and practical support to Vietnam, the Biden administration signaled its determination to counter China's efforts to alter the rules governing maritime affairs. This approach underscores Washington's commitment to ensuring that international waters remain open, secure, and accessible for all, reinforcing its role as a guarantor of regional stability in the face of Beijing's assertive policies.

Providing defense equipment to Vietnam

Following the 13th Party Congress, Vietnam set a goal to modernize its military by 2030, seeking to diversify its arms suppliers. While Russia remains a primary source, the US positioned itself as a key partner. A milestone in this partnership came in 2022 when Vietnam hosted its first large-scale weapons exhibition, attracting major US defense contractors.

US support for Vietnam's maritime defense includes providing patrol boats to the Vietnam Coast Guard, enhancing its ability to monitor disputed waters (Dan Tri, 2022). The US also supplied drones and plans to establish a marine data coordination center in Vietnam (Vnexpress, 2022). There has also been speculation about Vietnam acquiring F-16 fighter jets, which would deepen US-Vietnam defense ties and distance Vietnam from Russia and China (Reuters, 2023).

These initiatives not only enhance Vietnam's self-defense capabilities but also contribute to the broader regional effort to maintain stability and security in the Indo-Pacific. By bolstering Vietnam's maritime defense, the US strengthened a key pillar of regional security architecture, fostering a partnership that serves both nations' strategic interests.

Extending invitations for Vietnam to take part in joint military exercises

The Biden administration facilitated Vietnam's participation in joint military exercises with the US and regional allies, strengthening bilateral defense ties. Notably, Vietnam was invited to key exercises like "Pacific Partnership" and the "Rim of the Pacific Exercise" (RIMPAC), which focused on crisis response, maritime security, and humanitarian relief (US Embassy, 2021). Vietnam's involvement in these exercises enhances its military capabilities and fosters deeper cooperation with US and allied navies. The collaboration promotes mutual understanding and strengthens coordination, especially in addressing potential threats, notably from China in the South China Sea.

US naval ship visits

A prominent demonstration of the strengthening defense ties between the US and Vietnam was the increasing frequency of US naval visits to Vietnamese ports. In June 2023, the USS *Ronald Reagan*, accompanied by the guided missile cruisers USS *Antietam* and USS *Robert Smalls*, made a high-profile visit to Da Nang (VietnamNet, 2023). During the five-day visit, the US Navy Convoy Command Group engaged with senior Vietnamese officials, including leaders from the Da Nang People's Committee and the Third Naval Region Command. The visit encompassed a range of activities, including cultural exchanges, expert discussions, community service initiatives, sports competitions, and humanitarian outreach programs.

The presence of the *USS Ronald Reagan* in Vietnamese waters not only underscores the US's unwavering commitment to regional security but also reinforces its role as a reliable partner for Vietnam in safeguarding peace and stability in the South China Sea. These port calls serve as a potent reminder of the expanding strategic synergy between the two nations, highlighting their common vision for a rules-based maritime order.

Non-sanctioning on Vietnam for acquiring weapons from Russia

A key aspect of the Biden administration's policy towards Vietnam is its restraint in addressing Vietnam's ongoing procurement of Russian weaponry, contrasting with the punitive sanctions imposed on other countries under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). It signals a pragmatic US approach to strengthen defense ties with Vietnam, a crucial regional partner. As Professor Carlyle Thayer notes, this policy allowed Washington to maintain leverage over Vietnam while accommodating broader strategic interests (RFI, 2022). This approach exemplifies Washington's delicate dance of realpolitik, where fostering strategic partnerships sometimes requires bending the rules. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine adds urgency to the US-Vietnam relationship, especially as China may seek to exploit the situation regarding Taiwan. Given that 80% of Vietnam military equipment from Russia, therefore shifting away from Russian arms would be costly and challenging. This makes the US reluctant to impose sanctions on Vietnam. Because it could undermine Vietnam's military capabilities.

Promote Economic and Trade Cooperation

Bilateral Trade Growth and Economic Interdependence

The Biden administration actively sought to strengthen economic ties with Vietnam as part of a broader strategy to reduce Vietnam's economic dependence on China and foster closer alignment with the US. In 2024, the US remained Vietnam's second-largest trading partner, with bilateral trade reaching an impressive US\$ 132 billion (VnEconomy, 2025). In terms of investment, the US occupies a prominent position in Vietnam's economic landscape. With 1,150 active investment projects valued at a cumulative \$11 billion, the US ranks the 11th spot among 141 countries and territories investing in Vietnam. As of 2023, US investment capital in Vietnam amounted to approximately \$626.32 million (shown in Table 2).

Year	2020	2021	2022	2023
Vietnam's Exports	77.08	96.29	109.39	97.0
Vietnam's Imports	13.71	15.27	14.47	13.82
Total Trade	90.79	111.56	123.86	110.82
Trade Balance	63.37	81.02	94.92	83.18

Table 1: US-Vietnam Trade Volume (2020-2023) (unit: billion USD)

Source: collected from General Statistics Office of Vietnam

	2021	2022	2023
FDI	738.66	748.17	626,322

Table 2: US's FDI in Vietnam (2021-2023) (unit: million USD)

Source: collected from General Statistics Office of Vietnam

The Biden administration actively encouraged US companies to invest in Vietnam, with a particular focus on strategic sectors such as high technology, renewable energy, and

infrastructure. In September 2023, a delegation of representatives from 50 major American companies, including Apple, Dell, Google, Intel, and Microsoft, visited Vietnam to explore investment opportunities. Intel committed US\$ 1.5 billion to build a semiconductor packaging and chip component facility, strengthening Vietnam's role in the global semiconductor supply chain (Vietnam News, 2023). Apple relocated 11 audio equipment manufacturing facilities from China and Taiwan to Vietnam, solidifying its position in the country's tech ecosystem (Vietnam Investment Review, 2023).

SpaceX plans to expand in Vietnam by introducing Starlink satellite internet services to support the country's digital economy (VnEconomy, 2024). In renewable energy, Pacifico Energy Group completed a 40 MW solar plant in Mui Ne and a 30 MW wind power facility in Ben Tre, while exploring offshore wind projects (Binh Duong Portal, 2024). Even long-established firms like Coca-Cola are deepening their presence, with a new factory under construction. These investments highlight Vietnam's growing appeal as a destination for American businesses, fueled by its strategic location, skilled workforce, and improving business environment. They also reflect the deepening economic ties between the two nations, positioning Vietnam as a linchpin in the US strategy to strengthen its economic footprint in the Indo-Pacific region (Bao Chinh Phu, 2023).

The US's Pragmatic Engagement: A Shift from Confrontation to Cooperation

In managing the complex dynamics of bilateral economic relations, including issues such as trade deficits and monetary policy, the Biden administration adopted a more pragmatic and conciliatory approach compared to its predecessor. In 2020, the Trump administration's US Treasury Department labeled Vietnam a "currency manipulator", creating tensions in economic relations (Reuters, 2020). However, in April 2021, the Biden administration removed Vietnam out of this list (Vietnam News, 2021). This move marked a significant shift, symbolizing a recalibration of the bilateral economic relationship. It diffused tensions, providing a sense of stability and predictability that facilitated smoother cooperation and reinforced mutual trust between the two nations.

The Biden administration's approach underscores a broader strategy of fostering constructive engagement over confrontation, allowing the US and Vietnam to focus on shared opportunities rather than historical grievances (CSIS, 2021). This approach is particularly evident in the semiconductor industry, which has become a central element in the US-China strategic rivalry.

Semiconductor Industry: A Strategic Pillar in US-Vietnam Relations

As the US seeks to reduce its dependence on China in semiconductor supply chains, Vietnam's rare earth resources and growing tech capacity make it a key partner. The US-Vietnam Joint Statement in 2023 elevated their relationship to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership", emphasizing the importance of Vietnam in the global semiconductor industry. Both governments and the private sector are driving initiatives to enhance Vietnam's semiconductor capabilities. American semiconductor companies, such as Cadence Design Systems and Synopsys, are investing in Vietnam's semiconductor sector. Cadence focuses on advancing semiconductor design, while Synopsys partners with Vietnam's National Innovation Center (NIC) to boost chip design capabilities and workforce development (Vietnam News, 2023). Additionally, Arizona State University and Intel Corporation are supporting training and research efforts.

Regional Economic Strategy: The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)

The Biden administration sought to integrate Vietnam into a US-led economic framework to align with its strategic objectives. America's withdrawal from the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) created a gap that China capitalized on through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), enhancing its economic influence in the region (Tan & Soong, 2021). Additionally, China's formal application for CPTPP membership signals its intent to challenge Washington's economic strategy (Chinese Government, 2024).

China's CPTPP application in 2022, widely seen as a response to US competitive pressures, raises concerns in Washington about Beijing reshaping global trade to its advantage. For Vietnam, the US exit from the CPTPP was a setback, as it had joined the agreement to access the US market and made significant reforms to meet TPP requirements. This withdrawal has reduced America's economic influence in Vietnam, while China's regional dominance has increased, creating a delicate balancing act for Hanoi.

In response to these shifting dynamics, the US introduced the IPEF, a comprehensive initiative designed to reaffirm its economic and political influence across the Indo-Pacific. By championing the IPEF, Washington sought to create a new regional cooperation architecture, one that counters China's expanding influence while promoting US economic values and standards. Notably, the framework deliberately excluded China, signaling the Biden administration's intention to take the lead in shaping a rules-based economic order that prioritizes transparency, resilience, and innovation. As US Ambassador to Vietnam Marc Knapper noted, the IPEF transcends traditional free trade agreements by aiming to promote decarbonized industries, enhance supply chain resilience, and foster a prosperous economic environment for ASEAN nations (Vietnam News, 2024). Vietnam plays a central role in this initiative, particularly in areas such as "supply chain diversification", with a focus on critical sectors such as semiconductors and rare earths.

Evaluate the Effectiveness of the Biden's Strategies Towards Vietnam

Achievements

Strengthening US-Vietnam Relations: A Strategic Shift

For years, the Biden administration actively pursued the strengthening of its relationship with Vietnam. However, Vietnam historically exercised caution in its engagement with the US, primarily due to concerns regarding potential repercussions from China. Despite these reservations, Vietnam's recent decision to elevate its partnership with the US by two levels marks a significant shift, signaling the country's long-term commitment to cultivating a robust and multifaceted relationship with Washington. This strategic move not only underscores the growing mutual trust and respect between the two nations but also reflects Vietnam's increasing alignment with US interests within a broader international framework.

Defense Relations and Maritime Security

A notable dimension of the evolving US-Vietnam partnership is the deepening defense cooperation, particularly in the area of maritime security in the South China Sea. Both nations closely collaborated to uphold the principles of freedom of navigation, a core element in the context of the region's contested waters. Vietnam consistently supported US statements advocating for the protection of navigation rights in these disputed waters, reinforcing its shared commitment to maintaining regional stability and adhering to the rule of law. This cooperation

is integral to fostering a stable security environment in the Indo-Pacific and reflects the alignment of Vietnam's strategic interests with those of the US.

Engagement with US-Led Economic Initiatives

Vietnam's willingness to engage with US-led institutions further emphasizes its commitment to deeper cooperation. A prime example of this engagement is Vietnam's active participation in the IPEF. In 2023, President Vo Van Thuong attended a high-level IPEF meeting, where he highlighted three key areas for advancing collaboration among member nations: technology, supply chain resilience, and the semiconductor industry (Bao Chinh Phu, 2023). These priorities reflect Vietnam's growing integration into the US-led economic architecture and its recognition of the strategic importance of cooperation in these domains. Vietnam's decision to elevate its partnership with the US and its active participation in initiatives like the IPEF signal a significant shift in its foreign policy orientation. As the two nations continue to deepen their defense and economic ties, the evolving relationship underscores a broader strategic alignment within the Indo-Pacific region, characterized by shared interests in regional stability, technological innovation, and economic resilience. This partnership is poised to play a pivotal role in shaping the future dynamics of the region.

Limitations

Vietnam's Strategic Calculus: Balancing Relations with Major Powers

Vietnam has long recognized the US as a critical partner in counterbalancing China's influence in the region and fostering economic growth. However, despite this recognition, Vietnam remained cautious about deepening security cooperation with Washington. This caution is particularly evident in Vietnam's reluctance to engage in formal joint military exercises with the US, such as the Malabar exercise, which includes India, Japan, and the US. Vietnam's hesitancy stems from concerns over provoking negative reactions from China, reflecting its delicate position between two major powers.

Strategic Autonomy and Non-Alignment

Despite the growing partnership with the US, Vietnam consistently emphasized its preference for strategic autonomy and non-alignment. Vietnam made it clear that it did not seek to become a formal ally of the US, as evidenced by its decision not to join initiatives like the QUAD or fully endorse the FOIP strategy. This cautious approach enables Vietnam to maintain an independent foreign policy. By avoiding formal alignment with such frameworks, Vietnam strengthens its position of neutrality, ensuring flexibility in navigating complex geopolitical dynamics.

Strengthening Ties with China

At the same time, Vietnam continued to strengthen its relationship with China, as demonstrated by the 2022 Vietnam-China Joint Declaration (Bao Chinh Phu, 2022). This declaration, which enhances the comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership between the two nations, identifies six key areas of cooperation: enhancing political trust, expanding defense and security collaboration, deepening practical cooperation, fostering social ties, improving multilateral coordination, and effectively managing disputes. These efforts reflect Vietnam's commitment to managing its relationship with China while pursuing mutual benefits in these critical areas.

In a significant shift in 2022, Vietnam also joined China's "Community of Shared Destiny" initiative, a move it had previously declined to participate in (Channel News Asia, 2023). While this decision is largely symbolic and carries no substantial binding commitments, it represents a strategic reality: Vietnam still depends on China in certain aspects to safeguard its political stability and regime security. The initiative serves as a diplomatic gesture to maintain cordial relations with China while balancing its broader foreign policy goals.

Vietnam's participation in the "Community of Shared Destiny" initiative is not merely a diplomatic maneuver but also reflects its cautious approach to managing ties with a powerful and often assertive neighbor. China is not only Vietnam's largest trading partner but also a key player in the region's political and security calculus. By maintaining strong relations with China, Vietnam minimizes the risk of isolation or retaliatory actions from its northern neighbor, thereby creating strategic space to engage with other global powers, including the US.

Moreover, Vietnam's involvement in the initiative can be interpreted as a strategic tactic to secure China's support on sensitive issues, such as the protection of its one-party political system and its resistance to Western pressures on democracy and human rights. In the context of Vietnam's deeper integration into the international community, the regime's survival and the preservation of political and economic stability are closely tied to the "implicit support" from China.

Potential BRICS Membership

Vietnam is also considering joining BRICS, a move that garnered attention when the BRICS social media account announced Vietnam's potential membership in 2024 (Lao Dong, 2024). Although Vietnam has not denied this information, the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has emphasized the country's active participation in global and regional multilateral organizations and forums. The government is closely monitoring discussions surrounding BRICS expansion, underscoring its interest in being part of a dynamic and evolving multilateral system.

In a supportive gesture, Russia's ambassador to Vietnam expressed backing for Vietnam's potential membership in BRICS, highlighting the flexibility and open structure of the organization as a suitable framework for Vietnam (Tuoi Tre, 2024). This endorsement signals the growing importance of BRICS in Vietnam's multilateral foreign policy approach, providing another avenue for the country to engage with emerging economies and diversify its strategic partnerships.

Underlying Causes of Limitations

Vietnam's Independent Foreign Policy: Strategic Autonomy amidst Geopolitical Complexities

Vietnam has been pursuing a foreign policy defined by autonomy and independence, with the primary objective of avoiding subordination to the strategies of major global powers, including the US and China (Dung, 2022). While deepening ties with the US presents various strategic advantages, Vietnam remains cautious, aware of the potential risks that such cooperation may pose to its pursuit of an independent foreign policy. To mitigate these risks, Vietnam must exercise prudence to avoid becoming inadvertently entangled in proxy conflicts or power struggles between the US and China (Trinh & Huyen, 2024).

Adherence to the "Four No's" Defense Policy

Central to Vietnam's foreign and defense strategy is its "Four No's" policy, a fundamental tenet aimed at safeguarding the nation's sovereignty, upholding its independence, and ensuring regional stability. This policy is clearly articulated in the Vietnam National Defense White Paper (2019) and encompasses four key principles: (1) non-participation in military alliances, (2) non-alignment with any one country to oppose another, (3) prohibition of foreign military bases on Vietnamese territory, and (4) a commitment to resolving international disputes without the use or threat of force (Ministry of National Defence of Vietnam, 2019). This strategic framework reflects Vietnam's resolve to navigate international relations on its own terms, avoiding entanglement in external conflicts while prioritizing its national interests.

Balancing Relations with China and the US

Vietnam's strategic position between the US and China poses significant challenges. While the US offers opportunities for economic and strategic cooperation, Vietnam is wary of potential repercussions from China, which may resort to economic and military retaliation if it perceives Vietnam as aligning too closely with Washington. This could include economic pressures, such as reduced trade or investment, and, in more extreme cases, military actions. Vietnam's geographical proximity to China significantly constrains its ability to adopt an overtly adversarial stance toward Beijing. The historical memory of the costs Vietnam incurred from aligning with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, particularly the bloodshed associated with the Sino-Soviet rivalry, informs contemporary decision-making. This experience serves as a cautionary tale for Vietnamese leaders, deterring them from pursuing overly risky strategies that might result in confrontation with China.

Trust Deficit and Political Differences with the US

Despite the growing political trust between Vietnam and the US, a persistent trust deficit remains. Although the Biden administration has recognized Vietnam's one-party political system, ideological differences, particularly concerning human rights, continue to complicate bilateral relations. While President Biden has downplayed human rights concerns in the context of the strategic partnership, the US government maintains its critique of Vietnam's human rights record and continues to engage with advocacy groups on this issue. For example, the Biden administration continues to call on Vietnam to improve human rights and religious freedom, particularly urging Vietnam to release political prisoners (US Department of State, 2025). For Vietnam's leadership, these discrepancies represent a lingering point of contention. Moreover, the Biden administration's foreign policy is deeply rooted in democratic values and human rights, which, though not the immediate focus of their engagement with Vietnam, may resurface once the US has achieved its strategic goals. As such, Vietnamese leaders remain cautious, suspecting that recent concessions from the Biden administration may be temporary tactics, with human rights likely to reemerge as a priority in the future.

Concerns Regarding US Commitment to the Indo-Pacific

A further source of concern for Vietnam is the potential volatility in the US's commitment to the Indo-Pacific region. While US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has reaffirmed the continued focus of the US on the Indo-Pacific (CNBC, 2024), the deteriorating security situations in the Middle East and Europe may divert American attention and resources away from Asia. The ongoing crisis in Gaza, compounded by the escalating tensions between Israel and Hezbollah, presents a significant threat to regional stability, and there is the potential for full-scale conflict in the Middle East. Concurrently, the Russia-Ukraine conflict shows no sign of resolution, with

neither side making substantial progress, and Russia's provocative actions, including the threat of nuclear escalation, add to the uncertainty. President Biden's recent statements regarding prioritizing conflict resolution in Gaza and enhancing Ukraine's defense capabilities signal a potential shift in US focus. For Vietnamese leaders, this geopolitical shift raises questions about the reliability and durability of US commitments to the region, particularly in light of broader global crises that may diminish American engagement with the Asia-Pacific.

Vietnam's pursuit of an independent foreign policy remains central to its national strategy, as the country seeks to navigate its relationships with major powers such as the US and China. While benefiting from closer ties with the US, Vietnam remains wary of the potential risks of being drawn into a broader geopolitical struggle between the two superpowers. By adhering to the "Four No's" defense policy, Vietnam safeguards its sovereignty and strategic autonomy, ensuring that its foreign policy is driven by its national interests rather than external pressures. However, concerns about China's potential retaliatory actions, political differences with the US, and the shifting priorities of American foreign policy continue to shape Vietnam's cautious approach to its international engagements. These complexities underscore the delicate balancing act that Vietnam faces as it strives to maintain its strategic independence in a rapidly evolving global environment.

Conclusion

The intensification of US-China strategic competition has reshaped alliances across the Asia-Pacific, with Vietnam emerging as a pivotal partner for the US. As China asserts regional dominance, the US has sought to counterbalance its influence by deepening ties with Vietnam, recognizing its strategic significance alongside traditional allies like Japan, South Korea, and Australia. The US has pursued a multifaceted strategy to engage Vietnam across three key domains: politics, security, and economics. By leveraging diplomatic, military, and economic tools, Washington aims to cultivate a deeper partnership that aligns with Vietnam's foreign policy principles of non-alignment and strategic autonomy.

Washington has prioritized political engagement with Vietnam by emphasizing shared interests in regional stability, freedom of navigation, and adherence to international law. US diplomacy respects Vietnam's strategic autonomy, fostering cooperation without demanding full alignment. This approach aligns with Vietnam's long-standing foreign policy, allowing it to counterbalance China while maintaining sovereignty. The US-Vietnam dialogue has increasingly converged on concerns over China's assertive actions, particularly in the South China Sea, where Vietnam remains a vocal proponent of international legal norms.

Security cooperation has been a key pillar of US-Vietnam relations, expanding in response to China's growing military assertiveness. Washington has deepened defense ties through joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and arms sales, strengthening Vietnam's deterrence capabilities. Vietnam, while cautious of over-commitment, has engaged in US-led security initiatives, including the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), signaling its willingness to collaborate while preserving strategic autonomy. This careful engagement allows Vietnam to enhance its defense posture without becoming overly dependent on any single power.

Economic cooperation has become increasingly central to US-Vietnam relations, particularly as Washington seeks to reduce reliance on China-dominated supply chains. Vietnam's growing economy has made it an attractive partner, with the US emerging as one of its largest trading partners. Vietnam's participation in initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework

(IPEF) underscores its role in broader regional economic strategies. By fostering investment and market access, the US not only strengthens bilateral ties but also counters China's economic outreach, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The evolving US-Vietnam partnership is integral to the broader US-China rivalry. Vietnam's strategic location along key maritime trade routes enhances its value as a partner in securing regional stability. Strengthening ties with Vietnam supports Washington's goal of maintaining a favorable balance of power in the Asia-Pacific. Given China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, US backing of Vietnam's maritime claims bolsters efforts to uphold international law and counterbalance Chinese territorial ambitions. Vietnam thus serves as a crucial geopolitical counterweight to China's regional expansionism.

Despite shared strategic interests, the US-Vietnam relationship remains complex. Vietnam remains cautious about fully aligning with the US, as it seeks to maintain a delicate balance between the two major powers. Strategic autonomy remains a core principle of Vietnam's foreign policy, preventing it from becoming overly reliant on any single partner. Additionally, Vietnam's leadership remains wary of the long-term reliability of US commitments, given shifting global priorities that may divert Washington's focus from the Indo-Pacific.

The evolving US-Vietnam partnership exemplifies the broader strategic competition between the US and China. By strengthening ties through political, security, and economic initiatives, the US aims to enhance Vietnam's role in the regional balance of power. Vietnam, in turn, navigates its complex relationships with both Washington and Beijing, ensuring its strategic autonomy while benefiting from increased cooperation. As a key player in the geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific, Vietnam's evolving partnership with the US will continue to shape the region's strategic landscape, reflecting the intricacies of contemporary international relations.

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