

# VIETNAM–UNITED STATES DEFENSE COOPERATION IN ADDRESSING THE SOUTH CHINA SEA ISSUE (1995–2025)

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**Abstract:** This article examines the evolution of Vietnam–United States defense cooperation from 1995 to 2025, with a particular focus on its role in addressing maritime security challenges and sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea. Using a qualitative methodology combined with an institutional–historical approach, the study divides bilateral defense cooperation into three major phases and assesses their strategic implications for regional stability.

Within the theoretical frameworks of *strategic hedging* and *defense diplomacy*, the article analyzes how Vietnam and the United States have utilized defense cooperation as a means to balance great-power competition while safeguarding national interests and reinforcing a rules-based maritime order. The findings contribute to broader scholarly debates on defense diplomacy, small-state strategy, and security governance in the Indo-Pacific region.

**Keywords:** Vietnam–United States relations; defense diplomacy; South China Sea; strategic hedging; maritime security.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea is one of the most strategically significant and highly contested maritime regions in the world. It serves as a vital sea lane connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans, through which approximately one-third of global maritime trade passes. This geostrategic position makes the South China Sea not only a critical “commercial artery” but also a focal point of major power competition—particularly between the United States and China. For small and medium-sized states in the region, such as Vietnam, responding to this complex strategic environment requires a delicate combination of defense policy, diplomacy, and multilateral cooperation.

Since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1995, Vietnam and the United States have gradually expanded their cooperation from post-war humanitarian activities—such as accounting for prisoners of war and missing in action (POW/MIA), unexploded ordnance clearance, and dioxin remediation—to broader areas including maritime security, peacekeeping operations, and defense industrial cooperation. The elevation of bilateral relations to a Comprehensive Partnership in 2013 and subsequently to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2023

institutionalized defense cooperation as one of the core pillars of Vietnam–U.S. relations. These milestones not only symbolize post-war reconciliation but also reflect a convergence of strategic interests amid intensifying regional competition.

Despite notable progress, Vietnam–U.S. defense cooperation remains constrained by asymmetries in capabilities, differences in political institutions, and sensitivities related to balancing relations with China. Vietnam’s defense policy is guided by the principle of the “Four Nos”: no military alliances, no alignment with one country against another, no foreign military bases on Vietnamese territory, and no use or threat of force. This policy framework necessitates a cautious approach in expanding defense cooperation with the United States. Conversely, U.S. policy toward Vietnam is closely linked to its Indo-Pacific strategy, which emphasizes freedom of navigation, opposition to coercive actions, and the expansion of a regional network of strategic partners.

This article seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How has Vietnam–United States defense cooperation evolved since the normalization of relations (1995–2025)?

2. What are the main achievements and limitations of this cooperation in addressing the South China Sea issue?

3. In what ways does this cooperation reflect the characteristics of *strategic hedging* and defense diplomacy in the regional context?

By addressing these questions, the article contributes to scholarly discussions on defense diplomacy, small-state strategy, and Southeast Asian security within the broader Indo-Pacific framework.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies on Vietnam–United States relations have largely focused on diplomacy and economic cooperation, while defense cooperation—particularly its role as a strategic instrument for ensuring maritime security—has received comparatively limited systematic analysis. Scholars such as Carlyle Thayer (2020) and Alexander Vuving (2019, 2021) emphasize Vietnam’s foreign policy of “diversification and multilateralization,” viewing it as a pragmatic approach aimed at preserving strategic autonomy. Thayer (2020) argues that Vietnam’s defense diplomacy seeks to enhance deterrence through international legitimacy rather than reliance on formal military alliances. Vuving (2021) conceptualizes this approach as “smart balancing,” a form of strategic hedging that allows Vietnam to avoid entanglement in U.S.–China rivalry while simultaneously strengthening its self-defense capabilities.

At a broader theoretical level, Muthiah Alagappa (2003) and Amitav Acharya (2014) interpret regional defense cooperation as an integral component of the Asian security order, where norms of sovereignty, consensus, and power coexist. This perspective helps explain Vietnam’s pursuit of a “dual-track strategy”: expanding defense cooperation with the United States while maintaining ASEAN centrality in the regional security architecture. Bill Hayton (2014), in his study of South China Sea disputes, observes that U.S. presence functions simultaneously as a stabilizing factor and a source of increased complexity—an assessment consistent with Vietnam’s cautious yet expanding defense engagement with Washington.

Meanwhile, Vietnamese scholars such as Hoang Van Hien and Duong Thuy Hien (2021), as well as Nguyen Thi Que (2020), have systematically documented the evolution of defense cooperation through dialogues, humanitarian projects, and capacity-building programs. However, most of these works remain largely descriptive and lack a theoretical framework explaining the relationship between defense cooperation and strategic behavior. This article builds upon and advances this line of research by applying the theoretical framework of *strategic hedging* developed by Kuik (2008) and Evelyn Goh (2006), combined with empirical evidence drawn from three decades of bilateral cooperation.

Based on the existing literature, three principal analytical dimensions of Vietnam–U.S. defense cooperation can be identified:

**1. Institutional development**, reflected in key cooperative documents such as the 2011 Memorandum of Understanding, the 2015 Joint Vision Statement, and the 2023 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

**2. Functional cooperation**, encompassing maritime security, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and United Nations peacekeeping operations.

**3. Strategic signaling**, whereby Vietnam leverages defense cooperation with the United States to maintain a strategic balance vis-à-vis China while preserving independence and autonomy.

## 3. The Evolution of Vietnam–United States Defense Cooperation (1995–2025)

### 3.1. Normalization and Confidence-Building (1995–2010)

On July 11, 1995, U.S. President Bill Clinton’s announcement on the normalization of relations with Vietnam marked a historic turning point in Vietnam–United States relations, reflecting the determination that “whatever divided us in the past, let us consign it to the past. Let this moment be the moment to bind up the wounds and the moment to build” (William A. DeGregorio, 1995, p. 1329). This milestone laid the foundation for a stable, equal, and mutually beneficial bilateral framework, within which defense cooperation was gradually established. Following the 1995 normalization, the initial phase of defense cooperation was characterized by caution and focused primarily on humanitarian activities, including accounting for U.S. service members missing in action, unexploded ordnance clearance, and dioxin remediation projects in Da Nang and Bien Hoa. These activities played a foundational role in rebuilding trust after two decades of estrangement.

Between 1995 and 2000, a series of high-level visits took place, notably U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen’s visit to Vietnam in 2000, followed by a reciprocal visit by Vietnam’s Minister of National Defense Pham Van Tra to Washington in 2003. The port call of the USS *Vandegrift* in Ho Chi Minh City in 2003—the first visit by a U.S. naval vessel since the end of the war—served as a symbolic milestone in the normalization of military relations. The signing of the International Military Education and Training (IMET) agreement in 2005 established a formal framework for officer training cooperation, paving the way for a more sustainable defense relationship.

Vietnam’s foreign policy during this period clearly reflected the principle of “diversification and multilateralization,” as articulated by the Communist Party of Vietnam, emphasizing the approach of “setting aside the past and looking toward the future” (Party Affairs Section, 2023). Although cooperation remained limited in scope, it laid a solid foundation for initial strategic trust. Vietnam–U.S. relations began to expand gradually in the defense and security domain through modest cooperative activities that increasingly aligned with shared strategic interests.

During the normalization period (1995–2010), defense cooperation focused on three main areas: science and technology, military medicine, and humanitarian assistance, with particular emphasis on resolving the issue of U.S. personnel missing in action. Following normalization in 1995, Vietnam and the United States established embassies in each other’s capitals, and defense cooperation primarily concentrated on addressing war legacies, including unexploded ordnance clearance, dioxin remediation in Da Nang and Bien Hoa, and military-to-military exchanges. These efforts constituted an essential foundation for building initial mutual trust. In October 1996, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Kurt Campbell visited Vietnam; in 1997, the two countries exchanged ambassadors and opened consulates general; and in March 1998, the Commander-in-Chief of U.S. forces in the Asia–Pacific region paid a visit to Vietnam (Nguyen Thi Que, 2020, p. 14).

The year 2000 marked a significant breakthrough when U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen paid the first official visit to Vietnam, opening formal channels of defense engagement. In the same year, the two countries signed a bilateral trade agreement, and President Bill Clinton made a historic visit to Vietnam. Three years later, Vietnam's Minister of National Defense Pham Van Tra conducted a reciprocal visit to the United States, demonstrating growing mutual confidence. Also in 2003, the visit of the USS *Vandegrift* to Ho Chi Minh City became a historic symbol, marking the first presence of a U.S. warship in Vietnam since the war and opening new prospects for bilateral defense cooperation. In June 2005, Vietnam and the United States signed the International Military Education and Training (IMET) agreement (Hideaki Kaneda, 2013, p. 49).

In 2005, Prime Minister Phan Van Khai undertook a historic visit to the United States—the first by a Vietnamese prime minister since national reunification. In 2006, U.S. President George W. Bush visited Vietnam and attended the APEC 14 Summit. This was followed by State President Nguyen Minh Triet's official visit to the United States in 2007 and Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's visit in 2008, which coincided with the first Vietnam–U.S. Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue. Vietnam–U.S. defense relations experienced a noticeable shift in the late 2000s, particularly as the administration of President Barack Obama launched the “Asia–Pacific rebalancing” strategy and adopted a more explicit stance on ensuring security, safety, and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. In July 2010, at the ASEAN Regional Forum hosted by Vietnam, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton affirmed that the South China Sea held strategic significance for the United States and emphasized coordination with partners and allies to ensure maritime security and freedom of navigation in the region.

### 3.2. Institutionalization and Strategic Expansion (2011–2020)

The signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on defense cooperation in 2011 marked the first formal legal framework between the two Ministries of Defense, identifying five priority areas: maritime security, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, search and rescue, United Nations peacekeeping operations, and military medicine. The MOU was concluded at a time when the United States was implementing its “Asia Rebalancing” strategy under President Barack Obama, which identified Southeast Asia as a key region for sustaining a rules-based regional order. From the 2011 Defense MOU to the 2015 Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations, bilateral defense cooperation became increasingly institutionalized and strategically oriented. These documents established five core areas of cooperation: maritime security, search and rescue, UN peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and military education and training.

On the basis of the MOU, Vietnam–U.S. security cooperation was implemented through three principal channels, most notably strategic dialogue mechanisms, including the Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue and the Defense Policy Dialogue, which have been maintained on a regular basis. These dialogue platforms enhanced transparency, facilitated confidence-building, and provided an institutionalized framework for managing differences while expanding practical cooperation.

High-profile events such as U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta's visit to Cam Ranh Bay in 2012 and Vietnam's

participation as an observer in the 2012 Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise—the world's largest multinational naval exercise—demonstrated the deepening and substantive nature of bilateral defense cooperation. In June 2012, Secretary Panetta's visit to Cam Ranh Bay carried strong symbolic and strategic significance, signaling the normalization of military engagement and mutual trust (Hideaki Kaneda, 2013, p. 49). That same year, Vietnam sent observers to RIMPAC 2012 for the first time, reflecting its growing engagement in multilateral maritime security cooperation led by the United States and its partners (Nguyen Thi Que, 2020, p. 30).

A major breakthrough occurred in 2016 when the United States fully lifted its long-standing embargo on lethal weapons sales to Vietnam, creating new opportunities for expanded defense cooperation. During this period, numerous visits by U.S. naval vessels to Vietnamese ports took place, alongside the regularization of annual security and defense dialogues. The complete removal of the lethal arms embargo marked a significant increase in strategic trust between the two countries. At the same time, the U.S. Maritime Security Initiative (MSI) provided Vietnam with more than USD 2 million in equipment and training to enhance maritime domain awareness, communications, and search-and-rescue capabilities.

In April 2016, the U.S. Department of State officially launched the Maritime Security Initiative (MSI), aimed at supporting Vietnam in strengthening its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities and improving maritime domain awareness. Through this program, the United States assisted Vietnam with approximately USD 2 million to modernize equipment, enhance command-and-control systems, communications infrastructure, and search-and-rescue capacity, thereby contributing to regional maritime security and stability. In 2019, President Donald Trump visited Vietnam and attended the second U.S.–DPRK Summit in Hanoi, further underscoring Vietnam's growing diplomatic and strategic significance in regional security affairs.

These developments not only contributed to Vietnam's defense modernization but also represented a flexible and calibrated response to China's increasingly assertive actions in the South China Sea—particularly following the deployment of the Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil rig in 2014. The United States consistently reaffirmed its position in support of freedom of navigation and peaceful dispute resolution in accordance with the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). As Thayer (2017) observes, Vietnam's defense diplomacy during this period sought to “maximize cooperation without triggering confrontation.”

### 3.3. Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and Emerging Trends (2021–2025)

Since the establishment of the Comprehensive Partnership in 2013 and its elevation to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2023, defense cooperation has become a central pillar of Vietnam–United States relations. Following the upgrade to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2023, bilateral defense cooperation entered a new phase characterized by deeper institutionalization and broader substantive engagement. Defense Policy Dialogues held in Hanoi in 2022 and subsequent meetings at the Pentagon in 2023 focused on war legacy issues (POW/MIA and dioxin remediation), United Nations peacekeeping, cybersecurity, and defense industrial

cooperation. The participation of the United States in the Hanoi International Defense Exhibition 2024, where advanced military platforms such as the C-130J aircraft, M777 howitzers, and Stryker armored vehicles were displayed, reflected the normalization and deepening of defense industrial cooperation.

In 2022, the Vietnam–U.S. Defense Policy Dialogue in Hanoi, co-chaired by Vietnamese Deputy Minister of National Defense Hoang Xuan Chien and U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense Ely Ratner, concentrated on war legacy remediation, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, military medicine, POW/MIA accounting, and support for Vietnam’s participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations. These discussions highlighted the increasingly comprehensive and substantive nature of bilateral defense cooperation.

The 2023 Defense Policy Dialogue at the Pentagon further expanded cooperation into areas such as dioxin remediation at Bien Hoa Airbase, POW/MIA efforts, coordination within ADMM+ mechanisms, military medicine, cybersecurity, and defense industry collaboration. In 2024, during the official visit to the United States by Vietnam’s Minister of National Defense Phan Van Giang, the two sides signed a new Joint Vision Statement on Defense Cooperation, marking an important step toward deepening and providing long-term direction for bilateral defense relations. The statement emphasized enhanced cooperation in war legacy remediation, peacekeeping, military medicine, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and coordination in multilateral forums such as ADMM+.

U.S. military participation in defense exhibitions at Gia Lam Airport in Hanoi in December 2024, featuring platforms such as the C-130J, A-10C aircraft, Stryker armored vehicles, and M777 artillery systems, served as a powerful symbol of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the normalization of bilateral military relations. Beyond symbolic gestures, the United States has supported Vietnam’s defense modernization through assistance in upgrading radar systems, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and maritime surveillance capabilities. The transfer of Hamilton-class cutters to the Vietnam Coast Guard significantly enhanced Vietnam’s capacity for maritime domain awareness, search and rescue, and law enforcement at sea.

In addition, the United States has assisted Vietnam in strengthening its capabilities in non-traditional security domains, including humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, peacekeeping operations, military medical cooperation, and cybersecurity. Cooperation has also expanded into emerging areas such as environmental security and maritime environmental protection. At the 2025 Defense Policy Dialogue, the United States committed an additional USD 130 million for the Bien Hoa dioxin remediation project, bringing the total U.S. non-refundable assistance for this effort to over USD 430 million—an explicit demonstration of the dual-track approach of reconciliation and substantive cooperation.

This phase marks a transition from fragmented cooperation toward strategic convergence, as both sides emphasize shared interests in maintaining a stable, rules-based Indo-Pacific region. Nevertheless, challenges remain. Vietnam continues to carefully avoid perceptions of “tilting toward one side,” while the United States expects greater transparency and proactiveness from Vietnam in defense cooperation. Managing these expectations will remain a critical task as Vietnam–U.S. defense relations continue to evolve within the broader context of great-power competition.

## 4. Key Issues in the South China Sea

The South China Sea is widely regarded by Vietnam, the United States, and many other countries as a maritime region of comprehensive strategic significance, encompassing geopolitics, international law, economics, security, and environmental concerns. As a vital sea lane connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans, the South China Sea plays an indispensable role in global trade. Any attempt by a single state to exercise exclusive control over this maritime space would run counter to the shared interests of the region and the broader international community.

The South China Sea also represents a convergence of strategic interests among major powers, particularly the United States, China, and ASEAN member states. China views the South China Sea as a critical strategic space and has accelerated militarization while advancing expansive claims based on the so-called “nine-dash line,” generating serious regional concern. In contrast, the United States has consistently emphasized the importance of maintaining freedom of navigation and overflight, opposing unilateral actions that alter the status quo, and strengthening defense cooperation with regional partners, including Vietnam. In practice, the South China Sea has long been recognized as one of the areas most susceptible to conflict and instability, often described as a potential “hotspot” for security challenges in the Asia–Pacific region (Dang Dinh Quy, 2010, p. 9).

The region remains prone to recurring tensions, sovereignty disputes, and even the risk of localized conflict, particularly in recent years. Existing regional security cooperation mechanisms, however, remain limited in effectiveness and insufficient to address emerging challenges in full accordance with international law—especially the principle of peaceful dispute settlement. Tensions intensified notably in 2009 when China submitted a map depicting the “U-shaped line” to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, accompanied by official statements from various Chinese state organs that further complicated the situation (Hayton, 2014, p. 216). The situation deteriorated further in 2014 when China deployed the Haiyang Shiyu 981 oil rig within Vietnam’s exclusive economic zone and continental shelf, significantly escalating regional tensions.

Vietnam has consistently pursued the peaceful resolution of all disputes and disagreements in the South China Sea on the basis of international law, particularly the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Vietnam has also emphasized the importance of fully implementing regional commitments, including the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), while actively promoting the negotiation of a substantive, effective, and legally binding Code of Conduct (COC). These efforts aim to maintain peace, stability, security, and cooperative development in the region. While Vietnam prioritizes the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity and adheres firmly to its “Four Nos” defense policy, the United States focuses primarily on preserving freedom of navigation and overflight and preventing unilateral actions that could change the status quo.

Beyond sovereignty disputes, strategic competition between the United States and China—exacerbated by trade tensions and broader geopolitical rivalry—has had a profound impact on regional security dynamics in the South China Sea. The increasing U.S. military presence and operational activities, while

contributing to deterrence, also place Vietnam in a delicate position as it seeks to balance relations with China.

Despite the expansion of defense cooperation, Vietnam remains cautious in accepting military assistance in order to avoid exacerbating tensions with China. The absence of long-term strategic trust and alliance commitments means that Vietnam–U.S. defense cooperation has not—and is unlikely to—evolve into a formal alliance. Although the 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) rejected China’s “nine-dash line” claims, the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms has created a legal and strategic gap, constraining regional coordination and compliance.

Differences between Vietnam and the United States also persist in areas such as democracy and human rights, reflecting divergent political systems, historical experiences, cultural contexts, and levels of development. In addition to shared interests and converging concerns, bilateral relations continue to face complex challenges at both regional and global levels, where consensus on approaches and priorities is not always achievable. Addressing war legacies remains an ongoing imperative, while the enduring “war syndrome” in U.S. domestic politics continues to influence policy debates. Moreover, the rapidly evolving and unpredictable international and regional environment presents new challenges for the adaptation and further development of Vietnam–United States relations.

## 5. Addressing the South China Sea through Vietnam–United States Defense Cooperation

### 5.1. Areas of Cooperation in Addressing the South China Sea Issue

Although the United States is not a claimant in the South China Sea disputes, it shares significant strategic interests with Vietnam. As noted by Dang Dinh Quy et al. (2013a), the South China Sea is not only related to U.S. strategic interests but also to American credibility and power, particularly in ensuring freedom of navigation, overflight, and the lawful exploitation of maritime resources in accordance with international law. China’s increasing efforts to assert control over the South China Sea have raised serious concerns regarding the erosion of the international legal order and the threat to regional peace and stability. In response, U.S. strategy toward China has increasingly incorporated non-military instruments alongside traditional military tools, including economic and quasi-military measures (Dang Dinh Quy et al., 2013a, p. 311).

Against this backdrop, Vietnam–U.S. cooperation on South China Sea–related issues has expanded steadily. This cooperation includes sustained political dialogue, enhanced naval presence, energy cooperation, capacity-building assistance, and coordination in multilateral forums. The United States has provided Vietnam with large offshore patrol vessels, modern surveillance equipment, and training support for the Vietnam Coast Guard. Through the Maritime Security Initiative (MSI), the United States has also contributed to strengthening Vietnam’s intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, improving search-and-rescue operations, and enhancing maritime law enforcement capacity. U.S. naval vessels have made regular port calls to Vietnam, while Washington has consistently encouraged dispute resolution in accordance with the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), despite the fact that the United States itself has yet to ratify the Convention.

This bilateral coordination not only contributes to safeguarding shared security and development interests but also helps maintain a strategic balance in the region, encourages multilateral dialogue, reinforces a rules-based order, and promotes cooperation in areas such as maritime security, disaster relief, counterterrorism, scientific research, and environmental protection. Vietnam and the United States have worked closely within regional mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM+), advocating for dispute resolution based on international law. U.S. support for Vietnam’s position on UNCLOS, the effective implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), and the negotiation of a substantive and effective Code of Conduct (COC) has contributed to maintaining peace and stability in the region. The prospects for cooperation remain broad, provided that transparency, information-sharing, and coordination with other regional partners are sustained to mobilize broader international support for stability in the South China Sea.

### 5.2. Achievements and Challenges of Vietnam–United States Defense Cooperation

**Achievements.** Growing attention to and cooperation between Vietnam and the United States on the South China Sea have yielded tangible benefits. First, such cooperation has attracted broader regional and international attention, facilitated constructive dialogue in multilateral forums, and contributed to a more balanced approach to dispute management through peaceful and cooperative means. Although the United States has not ratified UNCLOS, it has consistently promoted cooperation grounded in the Convention’s principles, thereby creating favorable conditions for regional states to develop shared understandings and norms of behavior in the South China Sea.

Vietnam–U.S. defense relations have recorded significant progress across successive phases. In the immediate post-normalization period, cooperation focused primarily on POW/MIA issues, reflecting joint efforts to reconcile past differences and build trust as a foundation for broader defense engagement. From the early 2000s onward, defense cooperation expanded through high-level visits by defense ministers, laying the groundwork for more substantive collaboration. Addressing war legacies became a central pillar, with the United States providing hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars for dioxin remediation, unexploded ordnance clearance, and assistance to victims of Agent Orange. Notably, at the 13th Vietnam–U.S. Defense Policy Dialogue in May 2025, the United States committed an additional USD 130 million for the Bien Hoa Airbase dioxin remediation project, bringing total non-refundable assistance to approximately USD 430 million. These achievements have strengthened mutual trust and contributed to the stability of bilateral defense relations.

Vietnam and the United States have moved beyond a history of confrontation toward a future-oriented cooperative relationship. Since 2005, defense cooperation has expanded across multiple practical domains, helping to close the chapter on war legacies and elevate bilateral relations at institutional, diplomatic, and operational levels. This cooperation has fostered strategic trust and gradually narrowed existing differences related to ideology, war memory, Vietnam’s concerns over “peaceful evolution,” and perceptions of U.S. commitment. In the context of shifting global dynamics and China’s rise, both sides have adjusted their policies:

the United States has recalibrated its regional strategy, while Vietnam has proactively adapted by maintaining an independent, self-reliant foreign policy and skillfully balancing relations with major powers through sustained defense dialogue.

**Challenges.** Despite its growing agency in policy formulation, Vietnam continues to face structural constraints arising from great-power competition. Vietnam and the United States are not formal allies, which limits the depth of institutionalized defense cooperation and makes it contingent on policy orientations in Washington. This asymmetry can place Vietnam in a relatively passive position in certain circumstances, while the United States—given its status as a global power—may prioritize its own interests through new strategic initiatives without necessarily awaiting Vietnam’s adjustments. Current cooperation remains largely concentrated in traditional areas such as exchanges and the provision of second-hand equipment. Moreover, expanded defense cooperation with the United States inevitably affects Vietnam’s relations with other major powers, particularly China, reinforcing the need for Vietnam to maintain a neutral and balanced posture. China thus remains a key external factor shaping the trajectory and constraints of Vietnam–U.S. defense cooperation.

### 5.3. Future Directions for Vietnam–United States Defense Cooperation

**First,** Vietnam and the United States should continue to promote sustainable defense cooperation in the service of peace. Nearly three decades of cooperation have established a solid foundation for further expansion, yet bilateral relations remain shaped by a complex interplay of domestic and international factors that generate both opportunities and challenges. Strengthening strategic trust is essential for sustainable cooperation and should be built on transparent dialogue, mutual respect for legitimate interests, and consistent foreign policy principles. On this basis, Vietnam–U.S. defense relations can continue to develop in a substantive, stable, and effective manner, contributing to peace, stability, cooperation, and prosperity at both regional and global levels (Vietnam News Agency, 2015; 2023).

**Second,** multilateral cooperation should be enhanced in addressing maritime sovereignty and non-traditional security challenges. Vietnam and the United States are expected to further coordinate within multilateral frameworks such as ASEAN, ARF, EAS, ADMM+, and the United Nations. Both sides emphasize confidence-building, dialogue promotion, strategic balance, and the avoidance of entanglement in great-power rivalry. Cooperation should continue to prioritize peaceful dispute resolution, respect for UNCLOS, and the negotiation of a substantive Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. Practical cooperation areas include war legacy remediation, maritime security capacity-building, training, disaster relief, military medicine, UN peacekeeping, and support for defense industries. Guided by the principles of independence, self-reliance, and national interest, Vietnam seeks to combine cooperation with principled diplomacy, thereby expanding relations with the United States and other partners while avoiding confrontation or forced alignment.

**Third,** defense cooperation should be closely integrated with economic cooperation. In addressing South China Sea issues, Vietnam–U.S. defense cooperation should be complemented by stronger economic engagement to generate comprehensive national power. Respecting sovereignty and international law, both sides

can expand cooperation in the maritime economy, including offshore energy, renewable energy, port infrastructure, logistics, and maritime trade, in ways that enhance security and safety along international sea lanes. Maritime security cooperation—such as joint patrols, surveillance capacity-building, and search-and-rescue operations—should be aligned with coastal economic development, support for fishing communities, and efforts to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. Additionally, enhanced defense technology exchanges linked to civilian technology transfer can create new momentum for defense modernization and broader economic development. Integrating defense and economic cooperation will enable Vietnam and the United States to pursue balanced growth, maintain stability, and promote sustainable peace and cooperation in the South China Sea.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Over the past three decades, Vietnam–United States defense cooperation has made significant, substantive, and stable progress, contributing positively to the maintenance of security and stability in the South China Sea. Despite persistent challenges arising from differences in strategic interests, political institutions, and the broader context of U.S.–China competition, bilateral defense cooperation has continued to evolve in a pragmatic and calibrated manner.

Looking ahead, Vietnam–U.S. defense cooperation is likely to further develop along a balanced and rules-based trajectory, grounded in international law and mutual goodwill, with the aim of ensuring peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea while avoiding heightened tensions and conflict in the region. Given its pivotal role in bilateral relations and its broader significance for regional security, Vietnam–United States defense cooperation—despite enduring differences—holds considerable promise, provided that both sides remain committed to sustained dialogue, trust-building, and the pursuit of shared objectives centered on peace and sustainable development.

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