

# The US–Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership and the Key Role of Air Force Relations

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## Abstract

The government, military, and air force of Vietnam share US concerns about China's expansionism and intrusion in the South China Sea and want greater US assistance in building their defense capacity and developing their military capabilities. While the growing partnership with the United States will bring increasing security cooperation and diplomatic support, Vietnam will continue to confront China on its own, without a military alliance. Vietnam's acquisition of the US T-6 aircraft for pilot training sets the stage for a key partnership between its Air Defense–Air Force and the US Air Force and is helping Vietnam develop a more capable air force and move away from dependence on Russian weapons and China's influence in the 2020s.

## Introduction

The government, military, and air force of Vietnam share US concerns about China's expansionism and intrusions in the South China Sea (SCS) (Vietnam's "East Sea"), and they want more US aid in building their defense capacity and developing their military capabilities. Skillful US security cooperation with and assistance for Vietnam will be a large part of building the comprehensive partnership and enhanced ability to engage in the ongoing dispute with China. Vietnam's acquisition of the US T-6 aircraft for training Air Defense–Air Force (ADAF) pilots,<sup>1</sup> and the ADAF–US Air Force (USAF) relationship will be a keystone of the partnership in the 2020s and a significant part of the US strategy of helping Vietnam move away from dependence on Russian weapons and China's influence. It will also contribute to the US strategy of building partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>2</sup>

Vietnam is in the northwestern SCS, borders China, and has overlapping claims with China in the Paracel and Spratly Islands. David Shambaugh assesses Vietnam to be a "balanced hedger," because it must defend a land border from and maintain economic and political ties with China, as well as foster a growing partnership with the United States.<sup>3</sup> The country has long featured a strong national-

ist movement, especially with armed resistance against France, the United States, and China from the 1940s to the 1970s. In addition, Vietnam has experience in waging low-level conflict with China over the Paracel Islands and SCS, with outbreaks in 1974, 1979, 1988, and 2014.<sup>4</sup> China's unilateral seasonal fishing ban (from May to August) around the waters of the Paracels, as well as oil exploration in the SCS and militarization of outposts, continue to be sources of friction with Vietnam, which occupies 21 features in the SCS with two airstrips and mobile missiles.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the Vietnam's navy conducts joint patrols with the People's Liberation Army Navy in the Gulf of the Tonkin. Frequent meetings between leaders of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CVP) and the Chinese Communist Party are another sign of balanced hedging.

### **Approach**

Out of the 11 Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam is most noteworthy, because it is a US partner, supports a rules-based order as well as a free and open Indo-Pacific, and has leadership with the willingness and air force with the capability to collaborate with the USAF. Vietnam has been involved in disputes with China over the SCS for decades and has recently become a comprehensive US partner. Drawing on methods from my field research and article on USAF–Indian Air Force relations,<sup>6</sup> evidence from Southeast Asian and US sources, including semi-structured interviews,<sup>7</sup> and my recently published article on collective action in confronting China in the SCS,<sup>8</sup> I first analyze Vietnam's grand strategy and the ADAF and what they would like the United States and USAF to do to build capacity and develop capabilities. Second, I appraise what the United States and USAF would like Vietnam and the ADAF to do, especially to counter and deter China. Third, I assess how the United States and USAF might overcome barriers, advance mutual interests, and be creative in working with Vietnam and the ADAF.<sup>9</sup> Finally, I weigh different scenarios about how US and USAF engagement with Vietnam and the ADAF may change and evolve to meet future security goals, including the provision of deterrence in the SCS.

### **Vietnam's Grand Strategy and Defense Policy**

The CPV has developed a threat-based grand strategy for regime survival and to counter the rise of China while avoiding regional conflict. Vietnam's top national security priorities include protecting sovereignty by ensuring the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) has the capabilities necessary to enforce laws and protect interests in the maritime territory that it claims. This includes its 200-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and continental shelf in the SCS, which it considers of

vital interest. The party first worries about the domestic threat from internal opposition forces and second about China in the SCS and on its northern border.<sup>10</sup> The CPV learned the lessons from the collapse of the Soviet Union—to promote capitalism but use all means necessary to preserve power. Party leaders have set a national security goal of 6 percent annual GDP growth that they believe ensures internal stability. In the SCS, fishing and energy production constitute an important part of the economy and continuing economic growth. Finally, the country is countering China’s influence by cultivating close relations with the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, as well as Laos, Singapore, Malaysia, and other South-east Asian nations.<sup>11</sup>

Vietnam’s 2019 defense white paper reemphasizes the long-standing policy of the “three No’s”: no alliances, no foreign bases on Vietnamese territory, and no reliance on any country to combat others—as well as, in addition, no interoperability and no communications links with other militaries.<sup>12</sup> However, according to US officials, Vietnam’s Ministry of National Defense (MND) sees relations with Russia as transactional and China as a looming challenge.<sup>13</sup> Today, the United States is Vietnam’s first choice for defense cooperation but must account for China. Therefore, while there are limits to Vietnam’s efforts in building a partnership with the United States, there are also opportunities.<sup>14</sup>

While the white paper refers to the Vietnam–China “Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership,” it also raises objections to China’s destabilizing behavior in Vietnam’s East Sea and warns that circumstances and conditions will determine the future of the partnership. Vietnam stands against the use of force or threats to use force and wants to avoid conflict but also wants to deter China. The white paper states that Vietnam is ready to engage in “security and defense mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific region.”<sup>15</sup> This implies that Vietnam is interested in engagement with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) arrangement,<sup>16</sup> since the United States and Japan, India, and Australia are the main promoters of the Indo-Pacific concept. The white paper also expresses interest in greater involvement in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) security and defense mechanisms. Concerns about nontraditional security issues and the desire for more port visits, including by the US Navy and Coast Guard, create the basis for greater engagement with the United States.<sup>17</sup>

Vietnam is one of the best-armed Southeast Asian countries and has the potential to defeat a People’s Liberation Army (PLA) ground invasion.<sup>18</sup> Vietnam’s army is its most powerful military service and has been in the front of the queue for procurement, receiving T-90 tanks from Russia to help defend the northern frontier with China. Since 2015, Vietnam has turned to investing in its coast guard, ADAF, and navy. First, Vietnam focused on its coast guard and maritime

security, given threats to its interests in the Paracel and Spratly Islands.<sup>19</sup> In 2018, the ADAF took priority, and in 2022 the navy and navy infantry (marines) will have their turn. Vietnam has received two US Coast Guard cutters, and Vietnam's coast guard will use them mainly near their bases in the southern region, especially close to the Spratly Islands, to protect Vietnamese fisheries. While the coast guard patrols inside Vietnam's 200-mile EEZ, the country's navy also operates outside the zone in the Spratlys and with forays into the Paracels.<sup>20</sup>

In making procurement decisions, Vietnam's Department of Defense Industry in the MND prioritizes profitability, and military factories share reluctance to spend money unless they are guaranteed profits. Even if Vietnam received free US equipment, the ministry and its department might be reluctant to spend on maintenance. While Vietnam is capable of manufacturing unmanned aerial vehicles and other equipment with basic technology, it is not close to producing aircraft such as the T-6.<sup>21</sup>

Although Russia has been Vietnam's traditional arms supplier of choice and more than 80 percent of the VPA's equipment is Russian, the MND has diversified purchases that, since 2016, have been coming mainly from the United States, as well as from India, Spain, and Japan. In response, Russian arms dealers have allegedly been paying Vietnamese officials under the table to continue to buy Russian, which is possible since officials make only an estimated \$400 per month and must survive in an expensive Hanoi.<sup>22</sup>

### **Vietnam's Air Defense–Air Force**

The ADAF handles all aspects of air defense for the country and plays the role of a consultative organ for the MND on matters concerning air defense of the ground forces and the air function of other services and branches. The ADAF must build consensus in the MND to advance its agenda. The ADAF supports the navy and coast guard in defending Vietnam's interests in its East Sea, works with other agencies and services in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) operations, and contributes to economic development. The ADAF's defensive weaponry is a combination of surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and fighter planes that can defend Vietnam's mainland from People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) attacks. While the ADAF's MiG-21 fighter planes normally are grounded and other aircraft are approaching obsolescence, its SAMs still supply a measure of air superiority over Vietnamese airspace. Michael Beckley estimates that ADAF SAMs, including the SPYDER from Israel and S-300 from Russia, can shoot down PLAAF fighter planes over Vietnam, exacting heavy losses.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the ADAF has 35 Su-30MK2V fighters with Kh-31 anti-ship cruise missiles and 18 air bases.

The ADAF has no rapid deployment role outside the mainland, which limits its ability to defend outposts in the SCS. It does provide routine air defense with SAMs for outposts in the Spratly Islands. While the ADAF provides “credible support” of land and naval forces, it still suffers serious limitations in areas of command and control (C2), domain awareness (ISR—intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance), and airlift. ADAF pilots regularly fly over to PLA-controlled Woody Island in the Paracels (but in a straight line) and are unable to fly in severe weather or at night.<sup>24</sup> These problems demonstrate the air force’s limitations over its East Sea and need for the T-6 and intensive pilot training. In contrast, the PLAAF can launch more than 1,000 fighter planes, including some at night, from nine bases in southern China that could eventually overwhelm Vietnam.<sup>25</sup>

While Vietnam is buying more Su-30MK2V and Su-27 fighter planes from Russia, the MND and ADAF are looking to diversify their relations without buying too diverse an aircraft fleet. In relations with the ADAF, Russia has been losing ground to India, Israel, and France and especially the United States. In 2018, Vietnam turned its attention to obtaining T-6 trainer planes for the ADAF from the United States. In addition, India is supplying an offset for Russian training, and the ADAF has sent trainees to India. The ADAF engages consistently with the air forces of the United States, India, Australia, and Japan—the Quad.<sup>26</sup>

### **The US–Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership**

Since China’s 2009 nine-dash line declaration and 2015 militarization of outposts in the Paracel and Spratly Islands, Vietnam has moved increasingly closer to the United States, and there has been a marked warming in relations.<sup>27</sup> While the population of Vietnam favors the United States over China, the ruling CPV is aware of the need to balance relations with the two powers. Vietnam will not become a US ally but has strategic relevance as a partner that stands up to China.<sup>28</sup>

US Indo-Pacific strategy includes helping Vietnam to develop as a strong, prosperous, and independent nation. Vietnamese officials were pleased by the 2017 US National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy and their emphasis on competing with China, as well as the US pushback against China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Biden administration’s 2021 Interim National Security Guidance has maintained strategic competition with China as a top priority. On the downside, the CVP harbors concerns about the “two elephants trampling the grass,” with the United States taking a tougher stand toward China and increasing the risk of conflict.<sup>29</sup>

Vietnam would like the United States to invest more in Southeast Asia, shore up domestic support for the CPV, and reduce dependency on China. US presidential visits have helped to move the relationship forward, and more would be

welcomed. Given China's expansionist activities in the Paracel and Spratly Islands and the importance of the SCS, Hanoi would like a greater US Navy presence, especially aircraft carriers, to balance against China. Vietnam likes US freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) and overflight operations around the Spratlys and Paracels and would like more but cannot openly approve without provoking China. Vietnam would like US help in dealing with Cambodia, which is allied with China and causing fears of encirclement. Finally, Hanoi would like more help for the victims of Agent Orange.<sup>30</sup>

The United States has been building trust by addressing the Vietnam War legacies of Agent Orange and unexploded ordnance, which have affected a large segment of the population. For example, the brother and sister of President Nguyen Xuan Phuc died of dioxin poisoning. In dealing with dioxin and unexploded ordnance, the United States is working with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and training the trainers to deal with the problem. In 2019, the United States gave \$300 million to clean former USAF bases at Danang and Bien Hoa. The United States also has been attending to the disabled around former bases.<sup>31</sup>

The United States is trying to compete in Vietnam with China's BRI and Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank and is using the Build Act and International Development Finance Corporation funding to assist in the construction of liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals in Long Son in the southern region and Chan May in the central region, which would import US LNG.<sup>32</sup> Also, the US Indo-Pacific Strategy of countering the BRI could include building electricity transmission lines from the Mekong River Project in Laos to Vietnam. Finally, the United States can help Vietnam by auditing BRI contracts to uncover China's corrupt practices in developing the Mekong River Project.<sup>33</sup>

In 2017, the Trump administration's tough position on trade led to US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that Vietnam had done so much to join. US withdrawal from the TPP damaged relations, and Vietnam is still high on the US unfair trading practices list (a few places below number-one China). However, Vietnam has been trying to forestall a trade war by buying Boeing civilian planes and US LNG. US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) engagements and FONOPs in the SCS helped smooth the TPP withdrawal and helped keep relations positive and moving forward.<sup>34</sup>

Human rights issues remain a sticking point between Washington and Hanoi.<sup>35</sup> More than 30 members of the US House of Representatives plus several members of the Senate are concerned about these issues with Vietnam. The Vietnamese community in the United States continues to oppose the regime and has been pressing for the repatriation of remains of South Vietnamese Army soldiers

to the United States for burial. The US ambassador to Vietnam has been involved in this issue and others and has regularly met with the Vietnamese community in the United States to smooth relations. The United States takes issue with Vietnam's cyber-related laws against Google and Facebook. Vietnam wants information technology companies' servers to be located in-country so that it can track and punish dissidents for actions, such as the dissemination of videos of dissidents protesting possible 99-year leases on Vietnamese land for Chinese companies to establish special economic zones.<sup>36</sup> A persistent issue is religious persecution by the state against the 10 percent of the population who is Roman Catholic and against underground churches. Church–state land-rights disputes and state land grabs continue to be a problem.<sup>37</sup>

### **The US–Vietnam Comprehensive Defense Partnership**

In 2011, Vietnam and the United States concluded their first military-to-military memorandum of understanding, and the partnership made significant strides in the succeeding decade. The two countries have regularly exchanged high-level defense and military-to-military visits. In less than a year after the restoration of military-to-military relations, a US aircraft carrier visited, and port calls have continued almost every year since; a US submarine has also visited. The United States has worked with Vietnam on peacekeeping operations training and HA/DR training and exercises. They have also discreetly worked on search and rescue (S&R) training, trying to avoid provoking China.<sup>38</sup>

Vietnam pays keen attention to the partnership and is more committed to it compared to other US partners. Vietnam wants to be more assertive against China in the SCS and would like the United States to supply greater capability. Even so, defense relations will remain oblique, and Vietnam will continue to confront China in the Paracel and Spratly Islands on its own, with US diplomatic support but not direct military backing. In addition, the United States must account for Hanoi's absorptive capacity limits.<sup>39</sup>

Since 2012, the United States has supplied the Vietnamese military with security assistance, especially education and training, through State Department Title 22 foreign military financing (FMF). US international military education and training support for Vietnam is now the third-highest in ASEAN, going from \$100,000 in 2012 to \$40 million in 2019. In 2015, the United States ended the lethal weapons ban, and in May 2016 the door opened to security cooperation and foreign military sales (FMS) managed by the Department of Defense under Title 10. FMS expenditures were \$10 million in 2017 and jumped to \$82 million in 2019. The United States has provided Vietnam with excess defense articles, start-

ing in 2016, with the sales of a US Coast Guard cutter to bolster Vietnam's coast guard and maritime security.<sup>40</sup>

According to US security cooperation officials, there is a gap between security assistance (FMF) and security cooperation (FMS). FMF engagement has been piecemeal, while FMS expenditures are more seamless and effective at building the partnership than FMF, enabling military exercises and security sector development. In 2016, section 333 of the US National Defense Authorization Act (authority to build capacity of partner nations) required FMS to be approved year-to-year instead of on a multiyear basis, which has made it harder to build VPA capacity. Other FMS challenges include educating Vietnamese officials about US end-use monitoring rules.<sup>41</sup>

The US Navy and Coast Guard have had the best relations with the VPA, especially Vietnam's navy and coast guard. The US Navy has been given access to a Vietnam navy hospital ship, and HA/DR exercises enable the participation of US submarines. Vietnam accelerated the entry of US Coast Guard subject matter experts (SMEs) because the Spratly Islands are an urgent matter. The United States is leveraging partners. For example, Japan has supplied 18 patrol boats and provided undersea medical training for submarines, with US doctors included.<sup>42</sup>

The United States would like Vietnam to continue to draw closer to the United States and cautiously away from China and Russia. The US Embassy Defense Office in Hanoi is the gatekeeper for US–Vietnam military interaction, and the office would like Vietnam and the United States to focus on increasing HA/DR and peacekeeping operations training. While the United States would like Vietnam to partake in the Maritime Security Initiative and S&R training, US officials recognize that Vietnam cannot afford to engage in activities that might provoke China. However, Vietnam has remained interested in maritime security and S&R training.<sup>43</sup>

US officials in Hanoi advise that the US–Vietnam defense partnership needs to develop at a measured pace. US engagement takes place through a “narrow straw,” but high-level visits have still managed to increase dramatically. Japan, Australia, India, and other US partners all want to engage with Vietnam, which causes confusion. The US Embassy Defense Office coordinates with its counterparts from Japan and Australia to avoid duplication.<sup>44</sup>

There are only six Vietnamese officials for all engagements with the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Cuba, and Anglophone Africa. Defense meetings often have 40 US officials negotiating with a handful of Vietnamese officials, which proves awkward. The United States holds meetings with “messengers” who have no authority within the MND hierarchy. The United States usually brings SMEs from eight to 12 agencies, but Vietnam cannot absorb so many interlocutors, and it is hard to locate Vietnamese SMEs.<sup>45</sup>



US security cooperation with Vietnam includes exercises, especially the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) annual event in and around Hawaii, with practical training that has particularly helped develop Vietnam's naval infantry and its coast guard cutter bought from the United States. ADAF rotary-wing units conduct exercises with their US counterparts, focusing on HA/DR and personnel insertion. Exercises also focus on peacekeeping operations, including medical instructors and United Nations experts who certify the exercises. State Partnership Program experts from the Oregon National Guard participate in HA/DR and RIMPAC exercises, which provide the opportunity for the building of long-standing relations between American and Vietnamese military personnel. US defense officials assess that Vietnam is not ready to participate in multilateral Southeast Asian exercises, such as Cobra Gold or Balikatan, but that it could send observers. There is a debate concerning whether ADAF participation in US-sponsored Red Flag exercises is currently worth the cost.<sup>46</sup>

The Counter US Adversaries Act sanctions against Russia would lead to sanctions against Vietnam if it purchases the Russian S-400 SAM system, which has the ability to shoot down a US F-35 combat aircraft. Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defense system led to Ankara's expulsion from the F-35 program, and India's acquisition and US waivers pose the sorts of problems that could damage US–Vietnam defense relations. In addition, Vietnam's deployment of the older Russian S-300 SAM system is also viewed as problematic. If Vietnam goes ahead with the newer S-400 system, the United States must decide if it should impose sanctions or grant a waiver. Possible . Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act sanctions present a challenge for the United States and require skillful communications with Vietnam and deft application of sanctions and waivers.<sup>47</sup>

### **The USAF–ADAF Partnership**

The US and the USAF program of working with Vietnam's military and particularly the ADAF will be the cornerstone of the larger comprehensive partnership and is being managed carefully.<sup>48</sup> Already, the ADAF has more exercises with the United States than with Russia or any other country, and there have been annual airman-to-airman talks at the highest levels of the ADAF and USAF.<sup>49</sup> In September 2019, then–USAF Chief of Staff, Gen. David L. Goldfein, and then–Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) commander, General C. Q. Brown (USAF Chief of Staff since August 2020), visited Vietnam and interacted with senior officials, including ADAF leadership and the NMD's International Affairs Directorate.<sup>50</sup> The rising cooperation trajectory means that measured USAF and PACAF engagement will become

increasingly important. PACAF engagement with the ADAF has been scrutinized and endorsed by Vietnam's Central Military Commission.<sup>51</sup>

With the T-6 sale, the USAF has recently become the lead service engaging with the VPA given the accompanying training and maintenance package, maritime security potential, and future strategic prospects. In preparation for the sale, there have been T-6 site visits to Vietnam from US INDOPACOM and the Defense Security Cooperation Agency. Vietnamese officials have expressed appreciation for the T-6 package and the success of the US Coast Guard cutter program, in contrast with their unhappiness with Russian equipment and services. US Embassy officials in Hanoi believed that the T-6 sale represented a strategic shift from Russia to the United States "under the nose" of China and would be a major part of helping Vietnam move away from dependence on Russian weapons and corruption, as well as China's influence.<sup>52</sup>

The initial \$25 million sale will bring the delivery of three T-6s before mid-2023 plus part of another for spare parts.<sup>53</sup> In preparation for the T-6 delivery, the United States and Vietnam have set up an aviation leadership program for ADAF personnel that lasts for three years and takes two to three students at a time. There is extra training in English to raise proficiency levels to international standards. Also, there is training in managing partnerships, aviation culture, and safety, as well as air competence, risk management, and maintenance. The United States educates and trains ADAF pilots with contractors and T-6 simulators. The Oregon Air National Guard has been engaging with a fighter subject matter expert to upgrade ADAF fighter pilot capabilities. However, a challenge for the T-6 and other programs is that there are not enough ADAF SMEs; there are also entry barriers to bringing in US or SMEs from other nations. The ADAF needs to train 20 students to produce 14 pilots to fly the initial three T-6s.<sup>54</sup>

In the coming years, the USAF would like the ADAF to draw closer, with the sale of 12 T-6 trainers and a maintenance package, which would upgrade the capabilities of the ADAF. US officials would like ADAF pilots eventually to be able to fly in difficult weather and at night. The package for 12 T-6s would cost \$225 million over 10 years and includes sustainment and maintenance and would require 50 students to produce 30 pilots to fly 12 T-6s. Eventually, the USAF would like the ADAF to participate in Red Flag. This would help Vietnam to have more HA/DR and S&R engagement as well as C2 experience. The United States would like the T-6 program to be a stepping-stone to Vietnam's acquisition of USAF F-15E Strike Eagle fighters in the late 2020s. An alternative would be Israel selling F-16s to Vietnam in the 2030s as the T-6 program develops.<sup>55</sup>

The ADAF would like more joint exercises with the United States to prepare to counter the growing China challenge. The ADAF would like more equipment,

training, and retraining and especially low-cost T-6 pilot training. Just as important is a maintenance package for US equipment such as the T-6. Vietnamese airman interviewees commented that high-level airman-to-airman talks between the USAF and ADAF leaders have been useful and that they should continue. Interviewees asserted that the United States should also provide air-traffic control and adverse-weather training with the T-6 package. Eventually, the ADAF would like lower-cost F-16 and F-15E fighter planes. ADAF officers appreciate US English-language training and would like more and would additionally like to see more officers invited to US professional military education schools.<sup>56</sup>

### **Challenges for the USAF–ADAF Partnership and Recommendations**

The ADAF faces several challenges. First, ADAF pilot flying capabilities need substantial improvement. Currently, pilots use virtual flight rules or radar vector in perfect weather only and have no experience with adverse weather conditions. They have limited flying hours, and dependence on simulators has contributed to pilot error in three crashes (CASA C-212, Su-22, and Yak-52) in recent years. Second, the ADAF will fly the T-6 with a different approach than the USAF and will be tied into Vietnam's integrated air defense system. Third, the ADAF has been devising its T-6 plan in a vacuum when it needs US technical expertise. Whereas the US Coast Guard cutter deal was less technical and needed less supervision, the T-6 deal requires oversight by the US Office of Defense Cooperation in Hanoi and USAF SMEs.<sup>57</sup>

The United States and USAF also face challenges. Even after a T-6 site survey, there is risk on the US side, with the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and section 333 one-year cycles that could disrupt the sale. Vietnam is not allowing USAF T-6 SMEs the type of access that the US Coast Guard SMEs enjoyed, even though the T-6 program is longer-term and more strategic and complex. The Ministry of Public Security has been slow to supply base access permission. The United States must also be careful with the T-6 deal. Vietnam cannot change its position if it decides that it should cancel. Finally, the US Embassy country team in Hanoi must be allowed to moderate US engagement with the ADAF.<sup>58</sup>

The United States and USAF cannot rush stages of the T-6 program, must adjust to the Vietnamese pace, and must build consensus on one concept at a time, implementing one per year. The T-6 program should try to minimize US personnel. For example, the US Coast Guard brought too many uniformed personnel for the cutter program. Defense cooperation must be self-regulated by the US Em-

bassy in Hanoi, reporting to relevant officials in the Pentagon and INDOPA-COM and PACAF. The United States must queue for exercises. The USAF needs to fix its Pacific Angel exercise to become more focused on HA/DR and not so much on S&R so that the ADAF can more easily participate. The US Navy's annual Pacific Partnership exercise, focusing on HA/DR and with NGOs and regional organizations and states, is a more appropriate exercise model.<sup>59</sup> The United States must be willing to let Vietnam build its own hangers, train its own pilots, perform its own maintenance and self-sustainment, and move at a calibrated pace. Finally, Vietnam's plans may not fit with US plans, and Vietnam will decide the scope of the T-6 program and whether it should acquire three or eventually the entire package of 12.<sup>60</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Looking forward, Vietnamese and US officials believe that China will continue to expand and seek greater control of the SCS and its resources. The United States and USAF and Vietnam and the ADAF want a stronger partnership, but there are barriers to stronger relations and a more capable military and air force. Nevertheless, there are ways in which the United States and USAF can creatively engage. Both sides want a stronger partnership but for somewhat different reasons and at varying levels and rates of speed. The challenges are considerable, but with the right amount of will and creative effort, the United States and USAF and Vietnam and the ADAF can work together to overcome them and move the relationship forward. The United States has signaled that it is prepared to exert greater will to try to increasingly include Vietnam as part of a growing multilateral network supporting a "free and open Indo-Pacific."

Given the rising levels of Vietnamese and US interest and will, the prospects for the development of a strategic partnership and constructive USAF-ADAF relations are generally positive. The most likely scenario is that China continues to incrementally expand and the United States and Vietnam continue to slowly build from a comprehensive partnership toward a strategic one and toward stronger USAF-ADAF relations, with halting progress in the T-6 program. Other scenarios include aggression by China, Vietnam reaching out to the United States for a strategic partnership, stronger USAF-ADAF relations, and the T-6 program moving toward acquisition of the most advanced F-15E or F-16 fighter aircraft and some degree of interoperability. Also, problems could mount in US-Vietnam relations, and the T-6 program may not proceed as anticipated, which could lead to a plateau or decline in the partnership.

Most likely, the United States and Vietnam will continue to develop the comprehensive partnership and progress toward a strategic one. The relationship will

occasionally stagnate, depending on political conditions and the security cooperation situation. Although China continues to expand in the SCS region, there is little sign that it will escalate its activities toward open conflict. However, if conflict does ensue, the United States will have to choose either to take Vietnam's side and provide support or to refrain. While the United States, USAF, and IN-DOPACOM have shown that they want a stronger partnership and eventual interoperability with the VPA and ADAF, coming to Vietnam's rescue may be a bridge too far given the danger of escalation to war with China.

US and USAF engagement with Vietnam and the ADAF can eventually contribute to greater burden-sharing and deterrence in the SCS and Indo-Pacific region as a whole. Burden-sharing is necessary for the United States given greater security challenges from China in the Indo-Pacific. The continued rise of China and its grand strategy of eventually dominating Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific will require burden-sharing and stronger partnerships. Multilateral defense cooperation is the best way in which Indo-Pacific countries can develop regionally dominant air power and enhance deterrence in the region.

The development of deterrence against China in the region will require a multilateral partnership whereby countries commit themselves to acting in concert in case the PLA acts aggressively in one area of the Indo-Pacific. Regional deterrence will require a strong multilateral partnership, including the methodical buildup of air forces with US and USAF aid. The leaders of the United States and Vietnam and their air forces need to continue to discuss the strategic situation in the Indo-Pacific and their respective roles in providing deterrence. The USAF and ADAF can play a role in preventing China from achieving regional dominance by developing a shared outlook and respective strategies and capabilities to deter China from further encroaching in the SCS and on Vietnam's rights.

In overcoming obstacles, the United States and USAF can undertake initiatives to help the VPA and ADAF to become a regionally significant force. The United States and USAF can aid with training and equipment, including moving beyond the T-6 program and working toward Vietnam acquiring and developing US multirole combat aircraft, which would enable training and squadron development to proceed faster. US engagement could also provide the countries with a substantial capability boost, with bilateral mechanisms to develop ISR.

The United States should continue to build the partnership with Vietnam primarily through various forms of dialogue, simulations, and exercises as well as security assistance and exchanges. The USAF and PACAF can lead in partner development while avoiding a paternalistic and transactional relationship. Secondly, the United States and USAF should continue to promote US aircraft, weapons, and other equipment with the long-term aim of the USAF developing

increasingly complex exercises with the ADAF. The United States should work with Vietnam to build capacity and develop capabilities into making the ADAF a regionally significant force. ✪

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### Notes

1. Jon Grevatt, "Vietnam to Procure T-6 to Boost Pilot Training," *Janes*, 7 June 2021. The ADAF's air force component is also known as the Vietnam People's Air Force.

2. David Brumstrom, "Biden's Vietnam Ambassador Nominee Vows to Press Hanoi on Rights, Trade," *Reuters*, 13 July 2021. Ambassador nominee Marc Knapper promised that he would work to strengthen US security relations and raise the comprehensive partnership to a "strategic partnership."

3. David Shambaugh, "U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia," *International Security* 42, no. 4 (Spring 2018): 85–127.

4. Toshi Yoshihara, "The 1974 Paracels Sea Battle," *Naval War College Review* 69, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 41–65. The 1974 clash over Woody Island was between the forces of South Vietnam (defunct in 1975) and China.

5. Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia," *International Security* 42, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 78–119.

6. Stephen Burgess, "A Pathway toward Enhancing the US Air Force-Indian Air Force Partnership and Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific Region," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* (Spring 2019): 1–36.

7. In June–July 2019, field research took place in Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Future articles will analyze and assess USAF relations with the air forces of the Philippines and Thailand (long-standing US allies) as well as Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia (US partners).

8. Stephen Burgess, "Confronting China's Maritime Expansion in the South China Sea: A Collective Action Problem," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* (Fall 2020): 112–34.

9. Stephen Burgess, "Rising Bipolarity in the South China Sea: The Impact of the US Rebalance to Asia on China's Expansion," *Contemporary Security Policy* 37, no. 1 (Apr. 2016): 111–43.

10. US Embassy officials, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019 helped to provide expert assessments of Vietnam, its grand strategy, and defense policy.

11. US Embassy Political Affairs officers, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.

12. Derek Grossman and Christopher Sharman, "How to Read Vietnam's Latest Defense White Paper: A Message to Great Powers," *War on the Rocks*, 31 Dec. 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/>. Vietnam has not designated the US as a "strategic partner" yet, though the US considers Vietnam to be a strategic partner.

13. US Embassy Defense Attaché officers, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.

14. Eric Tegler, "The Practicalities of US Military Sales to Vietnam," *The Diplomat*, 5 Aug. 2015.

15. Grossman and Sharman, "Vietnam's Latest Defense White Paper."

16. Stephen Burgess, "Multilateral Defense Cooperation in the Indo-Asia-Pacific Region: Tentative Steps toward a Regional NATO?," *Contemporary Security Policy* (Dec. 2017): 1–22.

17. Grossman and Sharman, “Vietnam’s Latest Defense White Paper.” Nontraditional security threats include cyber, terrorism, climate change, piracy, and natural disasters.
18. Bich Tran, “Understanding Vietnam’s Military Modernization Efforts,” *The Diplomat*, 25 November 2020.
19. Michael Beckley, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia,” 100–01. Vietnam has been building up its coast guard with US and Japanese assistance.
20. Michael Beckley, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia,” 100–01. Vietnam People’s Navy has 26 ships, including six *Kilo*-class submarines, purchased from Russia, which it has been operating for more than five years, as well as two mobile antiship cruise missile batteries with a 200-mile range that it can use as a deterrent threat in a confrontation with China.
21. US Embassy Defense Attaché officers, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019. Also, former US Air Attaché in Vietnam, interviewed at Air University, 4 Jan. 2019.
22. US Embassy Defense Attaché officers, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019. Also, former US Air Attaché in Vietnam, interviewed at Air University, 4 Jan. 2019.
23. Michael Beckley, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia,” 100.
24. Michael Beckley, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia,” 101.
25. Lyle J. Morris, “China’s Air Force is Fixing its Shortcomings,” RAND, Oct. 2016. <https://www.rand.org/>.
26. US Embassy Defense Attaché officers, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.
27. Stephen Burgess, “The Changing Balance of Power in the Asia-Pacific Region and Optimum US Defense Strategy and USAF Strategic Posture,” report for the USAF Institute for National Security Studies and US Air War College, 2016. While Vietnam leans toward the US, Hanoi still hedges between Beijing and Washington.
28. US Embassy Political Affairs officers, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.
29. US Embassy Political Affairs officers, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.
30. US Embassy Political Affairs officers, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.
31. US Embassy Political Affairs officers, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.
32. “Status of LNG projects in Vietnam,” *MARINECURRENTS*, 14 January 2021.
33. US Embassy Political Affairs officers, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.
34. US Embassy Political Affairs officers, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.
35. David Brumstrom, “Biden’s Vietnam Ambassador Nominee.”
36. Giang Nguyen, “Vietnamese Protestors Clash with Police over New Economic Zones,” 11 June 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/>.
37. US Embassy Political Affairs officers, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.
38. US Embassy Defense officials, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019. The US Embassy Defense Office is headed by a Senior Defense Official and includes Defense Attaché officers and Defense Cooperation officers.
39. US Embassy Defense Attaché officers, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.
40. Eric Tegler, “The Practicalities of US Military Sales to Vietnam.”
41. US Embassy Defense Cooperation officers, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.
42. US Embassy Defense Cooperation officers, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.
43. US Embassy Defense officials, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.
44. US Embassy Defense officials, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019. US officials in Hanoi advised that the US–Vietnam partnership is like “dating” in which the two partners need to proceed at a deliberate pace.

45. US Embassy Defense officials, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.
46. US Embassy Defense Cooperation officers, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.
47. US Embassy officials, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.
48. Stephen F. Burgess, "The Rebalancing of the US Strategic Posture to Implement its Defense Strategy and Maintain Access to an Increasingly Bipolar Asia," *Contemporary Security Policy* 37, no. 1 (April 2016): 111–43.
49. US Embassy officials, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019. Russia, India, China, Israel, and Japan follow the United States in the number of engagements.
50. Charles Pope, "Air Force Generals Goldfein, Brown Make Historic Visit to Vietnam," *Pacific Air Forces News*, 12 September 2019.
51. US Embassy Defense officials, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.
52. US Embassy Defense officials, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.
53. Jon Grevatt, "Vietnam to Procure T-6."
54. US Embassy Defense officials, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019. One official thought that some Oregon National Guard fighter pilots were overly assertive and needed to "throttle back" in dealing with their ADAF counterparts.
55. US Embassy Defense officials, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.
56. Interviews with an ADAF student at Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL, 8 Jan. 2019 and with ADAF Air University alumni in Hanoi, June 2019. Also, former US Air Attaché in Vietnam, interviewed at Air University, 4 Jan. 2019. The interviewees recommended Air Command and Staff College, as well as Squadron Officer School and Air War College for ADAF officer education.
57. US Embassy Defense Cooperation officers, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019. One official commented that the country team must be the "adults in the room" to moderate US engagement with the ADAF.
58. US Embassy Defense officials, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019. The access challenge was exemplified when the ADAF would not divulge essential force details to the US president's Secret Service team prior to a 2017 visit.
59. US Embassy Defense officials, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019.
60. US Embassy Defense officials, interviewed in Hanoi, June 2019. Vietnam recently acquired two CASA C-295 transport aircraft to test them and will possibly buy more, which could be a template for acquiring T-6s.