

From Foe to Friend

Explaining the Development of US–Vietnam Relations

AMBASSADOR SCOT MARCIEL

Abstract

This article discusses the journey of the United States and Vietnam in developing a strong partnership from being former enemies. It highlights the challenges that the two countries faced in their journey toward normalized ties. It also presents how the two governments showed willingness to cooperate, building trust through addressing sensitive issues, including maritime security, POW/MIA cooperation, and refugee resettlement. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of commercial diplomacy and business constituencies in building a stronger relationship between the two countries. The article concludes that the development of US–Vietnam ties is remarkable, and their partnership is marked by regular and constructive engagement.

Over the past three decades, the relationship between the United States and Vietnam has undergone a remarkable transformation from foes to friends.¹ Today, Vietnam ranks as the United States' tenth-largest trading partner,² and the two countries have established a broad range of bilateral cooperation that spans traditional diplomacy, health and education, and even more sensitive areas such as maritime security. The partnership is characterized by regular and constructive engagement at all levels, demonstrating levels of trust and confidence that were unimaginable not so long ago. Though there is still progress to be made, the US–Vietnam relationship is a testament to the power of reconciliation and the potential for cooperation between former foes.

¹ This article is derived from Ambassador Marciel's recently published book, *Imperfect Partners: The United States and Southeast Asia* (Lanham, MD: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University and Rowman & Littlefield, 2023).

² Office of the US Trade Representative, "Vietnam," 9 March 2023, <https://ustr.gov/>.

The development of the relationship was not inevitable. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the two nations seemingly shared nothing but mistrust and antipathy toward one another. Initial postwar efforts to normalize relations stalled due to Washington's belief that Vietnam was not cooperating in accounting for missing Americans from the war and Hanoi's demand for reconstruction assistance that it claimed Washington had promised. Moreover, Vietnam's 1978–1979 move into the Soviet bloc, invasion of Cambodia, continued use of reeducation camps, the plight of the “boat people” refugees further deteriorated the relationship and pushed each government to view the other as being on the wrong side of the Cold War.³

Geopolitical Change and Pressing Issues to Address

In the mid-to-late 1980s, a shift began to occur as Vietnam initiated economic reforms and sought to reduce its dependence on a faltering Soviet Union. Then-Foreign Minister Nguyễn Cơ Thạch played a key role in this transformation, as Hanoi intensified its efforts to diversify its economic and broaden its diplomatic relationships, demonstrating a greater willingness to cooperate with the United States.

With the easing and ultimate end of the Cold War, the George H.W. Bush administration saw an opportunity to bring about a peace agreement in Cambodia, which would require Hanoi's support. The prospect of improved Vietnamese cooperation on POW/MIA accounting and the hope to encourage Vietnam to empty its reeducation camps and expedite the movement of refugees to the United States also played a role. These issues provided the two governments with a reason to increase dialogue and begin limited cooperation.

A Confidence-Building Road Map

In 1991, after much internal debate, the Bush administration offered Vietnam a “road map” toward normalization. The document proposed that, as Vietnam bolstered POW/MIA cooperation, emptied reeducation camps, allowed refugees to leave for the United States, completed its withdrawal from Cambodia, and helped achieve a Cambodian peace agreement, Washington would respond with increased humanitarian assistance, gradual easing of its economic embargo, and other measures important to Vietnam. Although Vietnam never officially ac-

³ Richard C. Holbrooke, “Statement before the Asian-Pacific Subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs,” 13 June 1979, reprinted in *Department of State Bulletin* 79, no. 239 (October 1979), <https://heinonline-org.stanford.idm.oclc.org/>.

cepted the road map, it largely followed it in practice, leading to a positive cycle of increased cooperation on issues of concern to the United States and concrete steps toward establishing diplomatic relations.⁴

This process yielded consistent outcomes. In 1991, Vietnam permitted the United States to establish a POW/MIA accounting office in Hanoi and shortly thereafter joined Washington in supporting the long-sought Cambodian peace agreement. The United States delivered humanitarian assistance to Vietnam, reduced restrictions on Vietnamese diplomats at the United Nations, and loosened constraints on US citizen travel to Vietnam.⁵ As Vietnamese cooperation on POW/MIA accounting grew, the following year, Washington provided additional humanitarian assistance, allowed telecommunications links between the two countries, and permitted US companies to assist in meeting basic human needs in Vietnam.⁶ In 1993, the Clinton administration ended US opposition to multilateral development bank lending to Vietnam and opened the first US Department of State office in Hanoi.⁷

Normalization

With growing trust between the two countries, the pace of progress toward normalized ties depended heavily on improved Vietnamese cooperation on POW/MIA accounting. Although some influential groups in the United States continued to argue that Vietnam was not cooperating sufficiently, a growing number felt otherwise. Essential political cover for movement toward normalization was provided by influential members of Congress, led by former POW Senator John McCain (R-AZ) and Vietnam veteran Senator John Kerry (D-MA).

In early 1994, President Bill Clinton lifted the embargo and announced the opening of liaison offices in each other's capitals, which was a significant step toward establishing full diplomatic relations. These moves came were made possible by the further expansion of POW/MIA cooperation and continued US humanitarian assistance.

⁴ Marciel, *Imperfect Partners*, 134–35.

⁵ Marciel, *Imperfect Partners*, 135; and Steven Greenhouse, “U.S. Open to Talks on Ties with Vietnam,” *New York Times*, 23 October 1991.

⁶ Mark E. Manyin, “The Vietnam-U.S. Normalization Process,” CRS Issue Brief for Congress (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 17 June 2005), 3, <https://fas.org/>.

⁷ Thomas Lippman, “U.S. Drops Opposition to Loans to Vietnam,” *Washington Post*, 3 July 1993. The author opened the Department of State office in Hanoi in August 1993.

Leading with Commercial Ties/Building Business Constituencies

The establishment was a major milestone, but it was just the beginning of a continuing effort to strengthen the relationship between the United States and Vietnam. Commercial diplomacy was a driving force in this process, marked by the signing of a bilateral trade agreement in 2001 and Vietnam's subsequent accession to the World Trade Organization in 2007. These steps led to a considerable surge in trade and US investment, creating a strong business constituency that continues to support closer ties between the two countries.

Addressing War Legacies

Addressing issues stemming from the Vietnam War has been another essential ingredient of the improving relationship between Vietnam and the United States. Vietnam's increased cooperation on accounting for missing Americans was essential to early progress, including President Clinton's 1995 decision to normalize relations, and remained a critical element in the subsequent strengthening of the relationship. Moreover, regular and close cooperation on the issue proved critical in building personal relationships and trust between the two governments. Remarkably, an issue that had deeply divided the two countries ended up being the catalyst for bringing them together.

Vietnam's leadership also needed to see that Washington would address legacy issues affecting the Vietnamese people, particularly the continuing impact of unexploded ordnance and the health and environmental effects of the Agent Orange defoliant that US forces widely sprayed during the war. Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) played a crucial role in supporting Washington's provision of assistance, beginning in 1989, to help victims of landmines and unexploded ordnance. While the response was slower on Agent Orange, the United States steadily increased assistance starting in the mid-2000s. The programs initially focused on helping individuals with disabilities and later expanded to include significant assistance to address so-called chemical "hot spots" in former US military bases.⁸ This was important for the Vietnamese people and demonstrated Washington's willingness to address issues that were critical to Vietnam's domestic audience.

⁸ Michael F. Martin, *U.S. Agent Orange/Dioxin Assistance to Vietnam* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 21 February 2019), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>; and Michael F. Martin, *U.S. Agent Orange/Dioxin Assistance to Vietnam* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 15 January 2021), <https://fas.org/>.

Managing the Irritants

The United States has consistently raised concerns, both publicly and privately, about Vietnam's human rights record and its respect for religious freedom, which has been an ongoing source of tension in the relationship. In turn, Hanoi has expressed concern about US-based Vietnamese groups that have advocated for regime change, in some cases labeling them "terrorists."⁹

Importantly, while the two governments have regularly discussed and even clashed over human rights and related issues, they have not let them define the entire relationship. In other words, the governments have not ignored these issues but have not prevented broad progress in the overall relationship. This reflects the view in Washington that changing Vietnam's communist political system was infeasible and the recognition in Hanoi that the benefits from the relationship far outweighed concerns about US political goals.

China and the Beginnings of a Security Relationship

Although analysts today often consider shared concerns over China a key factor in the US–Vietnam relationship, security cooperation lagged behind the overall relationship for many years due to Vietnamese suspicion of US intentions and Washington's human rights concerns. It was only when China became increasingly assertive in the South China Sea that the two countries began regular low-level dialogue on security matters in the early 2000s. Over the next decade, cooperation gradually increased, bolstered by China's growing aggression and the Obama administration's decisions to provide security-related assistance with a focus on the maritime arena.¹⁰

Regular High-Level Engagement/Quality Diplomacy

A crucial but often overlooked factor in the strengthening of the US–Vietnam relationship has been a combination of regular high-level meetings and skillful diplomacy. From early on, senior Vietnamese officials have been actively seeking high-level meetings with US leaders, setting themselves apart from other Southeast Asian diplomats who have taken a more low-key approach. Even after John McCain lost the 2008 presidential election to Barack Obama, Hanoi wasted no time in reaching out to the new administration and securing a series of high-level

⁹ "Vietnam Declares California-based Group Terrorist," *Reuters*, 7 October 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

¹⁰ See: Marciel, *Imperfect Partners*, 161–62.

visits that ultimately led to the announcement of a “comprehensive partnership” in 2013.¹¹ When Donald Trump was elected in 2016, Vietnam made a concerted effort to be the first Southeast Asian government to secure a meeting with the new president.¹² These regular top-level bilateral meetings are crucial in keeping the busy Washington foreign policy community focused on Vietnam.

Another factor contributing to the strengthening of the US-Vietnam relationship has been Hanoi’s adeptness at working Washington. Vietnamese diplomats have actively engaged key players in the US capital, while top officials in Hanoi have made it a point of welcoming and working productively with US visitors. Vietnam has also cultivated a reputation in the United States for being pragmatic and results-driven, which is hugely important when dealing with senior US officials or business executives who may be hesitant to invest significant time and effort in engagement unless they are confident it will yield tangible benefits.

The Limits of Partnership

Over the past 30 years, a pragmatic approach, shared interests, and sustained effort have propelled the US–Vietnam relationship forward, resulting in a partnership that benefits both countries. However, the consistently positive trajectory of the relationship has at times led analysts to become overly optimistic about its potential, with some suggesting the United States might gain regular access to the Cam Ranh Bay naval base or establish a significant security partnership with Vietnam.¹³ Vietnam’s reluctance to elevate the relationship to a strategic partnership should serve as a reminder that while bilateral ties have advanced, Hanoi remains concerned about antagonizing China and is wary of how Washington views its one-party system. Similarly, US concerns about Vietnam’s human rights record continue to limit how far the relationship can progress. While this may disappoint some, the reality remains that the journey from former foes to current friends has been a remarkable achievement and serves as a case study in successful diplomacy.

¹¹ “Joint Statement by President Barack Obama of the United States and President Truong Tan Sang of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam” (press release, The White House, 25 July 2013), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/>.

¹² Mark Landler, “Trump Hosts Prime Minister Phuc of Vietnam and Announces Trade Deals,” *New York Times*, 31 May 2017.

¹³ See, for example, John R. Wilkinson, “U.S.-Vietnamese Security Cooperation for Access to the SCS” (student paper, US Naval War College, 16 June 2015), <https://apps.dtic.mil/>; and Dov S. Zakheim, “America’s Presence in Cam Ranh Bay Should Be More than Occasional,” *The Hill*, 29 September 2020, <https://thehill.com/>.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the journey of the United States and Vietnam from foes to friends has been a remarkable one, marked by significant progress in diplomatic and economic relations. Despite initial mistrust and antipathy after the Vietnam War, the two countries were able to build a constructive partnership through a confidence-building road map, improve cooperation on issues of concern, and develop a willingness to address war legacy issues. The establishment of normalized ties, commercial diplomacy, and addressing war legacies were all essential ingredients of this process. The ongoing cooperation and growing partnership between the United States and Vietnam highlight the power of diplomacy and the potential for nations to put aside past conflicts and work together toward a shared future. ✪

Ambassador Scot Marciel

Scot Marciel is the Oksenberg-Rohlen Fellow at Stanford University's Walter H. Shorenstein Asia Pacific Research Center and a Senior Advisor at BowerGroupAsia. He retired from the U.S. Foreign Service in April 2022 after a 37-year career that included assignments as Ambassador to Myanmar, Ambassador to Indonesia, and Ambassador for ASEAN Affairs, as well as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific. He was the first U.S. diplomat to serve in Hanoi after the Vietnam War, opening a State Department office there in 1993 and leading the US Embassy's political-economic section after the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1995.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed or implied in the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Department of the Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government or their international equivalents.