Fostering Hope
Three “Good Elements” for a Promising
US–Vietnam Strategic Partnership

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Abstract

President Joe Biden’s upcoming two-day state-level visit to Vietnam on 10–11 September 2023, presents a pivotal moment in US–Vietnam relations. This visit, at the invitation of Communist Party Vietnam's General-Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng, underscores the commitment of both nations to deepen their cooperation.

Employing the Vietnamese concept of “three good elements”—good timing (thiên thời), good conditions (địa lợi), and good synergy (nhân hòa)—as an analytical framework, this article assesses the prospects of upgrading bilateral ties to a strategic partnership or even a comprehensive strategic partnership.

This article examines how these three good elements align to create a hopeful outlook for the future of US–Vietnam relations and the potential announcement of a strategic partnership during President Biden’s visit.

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Washington and Hanoi have officially confirmed President Joe Biden’s state-level two-day visit to Vietnam on 10–11 September 2023, following an invitation from the General-Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), Nguyễn Phú Trọng. According to the White House, President Biden will engage in discussions with Vietnamese leaders to further deepen cooperation between the two countries.1 In a March phone call, President Biden and General-Secretary Trọng concurred on the need to upgrade bilateral relations at an opportune moment.2 Consequently, sources closely connected to the White House have revealed that Biden and Trọng will formally announce the elevation of bilateral ties to the level of a “strategic partnership” (SP) or, as some reports suggest, possibly even a “comprehensive strategic partnership” (CSP). This is the highest diplomatic tier in Vietnam’s hierarchy, previ-

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ously formed with only four countries, including Russia, China, India, and recently, South Korea. Such an occurrence would mark a historic breakthrough for both nations.

Vietnamese analytical thinking often revolves around three key elements for success: good timing (thiên thời), good conditions (địa lợi), and good synergy (nhân hòa). This approach is rooted in practicality rather than superstition and reflects the Vietnamese preference for meticulous planning to ensure maximum gain. This mind-set extends to the realm of foreign affairs, where Vietnamese leaders occasionally reference these elements to assess the prospects of improving diplomatic ties with other countries. Good timing signifies choosing the right moment for specific actions, good conditions involve creating enabling environments both internally and externally, and good synergy entails combining internal support and external cooperation to achieve shared goals.

In 1995, the Clinton administration decided to normalize diplomatic relations with Vietnam, emphasizing that “the time has come for America to move forward on Vietnam.” This decision came after Vietnam had demonstrated goodwill cooperation on POW/MIA issues with the United States, opened its economy to the world for nearly a decade, and was on the verge of gaining official admission to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In response, the Vietnamese government stated that this decision “complies with the current trend in international development.” Since then, bilateral cooperation has deepened, as described by the current US Ambassador, Marc Knapper, who characterizes it as having reached a substantive strategic level. In a bold statement, Knapper’s predecessor, Daniel Kritenbrink, who now serves as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, remarked that “only the sky is the limit in bilateral relations between the two nations.”

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7 “Trong cuộc phòng ván tài ván phong Zing, Đại sứ Mỹ tại Việt Nam Daniel Kritenbrink cho rằng đắc dịch Covid-19 đã tạo đặm sốt đầy liên kết bến prerequisite hai nước,” Zing News
Over the past decade, both sides have sought to upgrade their relations, with the most advanced diplomatic level achieved being the comprehensive partnership (UVCP) established in 2013. This move was primarily driven by Vietnam’s security concerns following a series of disputes and clashes with China in the South China Sea. By applying the three-good-elements analytical framework, there is optimism for a positive outcome as President Biden visits Hanoi this month.

Good Timing (Thiên Thời)

In 2010, during a ceremony commemorating the fifteenth anniversary of Vietnam–US diplomatic relations, Secretary Hillary Clinton declared the United States’ readiness “to take the U.S-Vietnam relationship to the next level of engagement, cooperation, friendship, and partnership.” In the same vein, she then urged both sides to do “everything we can together to sustain and deepen this relationship,” proposing the elevation of the partnership to the level of an SP during her discussions with Vietnamese leaders.

Vietnam responded positively to this proposal through conversations between Deputy Prime Minister cum Foreign Minister Phạm Gia Khiêm and his successor, Phạm Bình Minh, during their meetings with Secretary Clinton in 2011. At a Lunar New Year celebration in Washington in early 2012, Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States, Lê Công Phượng, surprised the audience by announcing the imminent upgrade of ties to the level of an SP. Later that year, Vietnamese Foreign Minister Minh, speaking with scholars at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, emphasized that it was “the right time for us to bring our relationship into the next phase of cooperation,” implicitly suggesting


an SP. However, unverified sources suggest that these efforts faced obstacles due to bilateral disagreements concerning the handling of human rights issues.

In 2013, following the establishment of the UVCP, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng, in a keynote address at the Shangri-La Security Dialogue in Singapore, conveyed Vietnam’s intention for an SP with the United States. Unfortunately, Washington opted not to act upon the message. To date, Vietnam has established SPs with four other countries and CSPs with China and Russia. However, such a partnership with the United States has not been realized.

Approaching the twenty-fifth anniversary of bilateral relations in 2020, General–Secretary Trọng was set to visit Washington at the invitation of President Donald Trump. However, due to his recovery from a minor stroke, US presidential elections, preparations for the 13th Party Congress, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the visit never materialized under the Trump administration, resulting in a stagnation of bilateral ties.

Since 2021, the Biden administration has twice proposed upgrading the relationship to a strategic partnership, first by Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and then by Vice President Kamala Harris. Vietnam’s hesitancy regarding these suggestions stems from concerns over China’s reaction, US pressure on improving human rights records, and Vietnam’s trust in the United States.

On 29 March 2023, President Biden had a phone conversation with General–Secretary Trọng, marking the first direct communication between the two nations’ leaders in eight years. They took the opportunity to extend mutual invitations for...
visits and agreed to “promote, develop and deepen ties” and “request relevant agencies to discuss specific contents for an upgrade of the bilateral ties.”

This year presents an opportune moment for the upgrade, signifying not only the maturation of bilateral ties after 28 years of diplomatic relations and a decade of the UVCP but also Vietnam’s strategic maneuvering, referred to as bamboo diplomacy to balance its relations with major powers amid China’s increased regional influence and continued assertive actions in the South China Sea.

**Good Conditions (Địa Lý)**

Several domestic and international conditions favor the enhancement of Vietnam–US relations. Vietnam has emerged as a role model for development and swift recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. During the 2011–2020 period, the country maintained an average economic growth rate of approximately 6 percent. In 2022, Vietnam achieved an impressive gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate of 8.2 percent, one of the highest levels since the launch of economic reforms in 1986. This remarkable economic performance not only strengthens the legitimacy of the CPV but also attracts foreign investors seeking alternatives to China amid growing US–China competition. In March, the largest-ever US business delegation, comprising representatives from 52 major corporations, visited Vietnam to explore investment opportunities. Vietnam anticipates the United States becoming its leading investor.

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Despite turbulence and uncertainty in Vietnam’s top-level politics earlier this year due to the anticorruption campaign, humorously dubbed “Đốt Lò” (or furnace firing), the CPV’s Politburo, under General-Secretary Trọng’s leadership, has reached a consensus on defining “targeted subjects” (đối tượng) and “partnerships” (đối tác). This framework sets guidelines for Vietnam to engage and cooperate with other countries. Notably, it views the United States both as a “targeted subject” in the realm of human rights and democracy and as a partner to advance cooperation in areas such as economics, trade, investment, education, defense, security, science, and technology.

Vietnam’s foreign policy is grounded in principles of “independence, self-reliance, peace, cooperation and development; the foreign policy of openness and diversification and multilateralization of international relations. Proactively and actively engage in international economic integration while expanding international cooperation in other fields. Viet Nam is a friend and reliable partner of all countries in the international community.” Vietnam adheres to a “Four Nos” defense policy: no military alliances, no alignment against any country, no foreign military bases on its territory, and no threat or use of force in international relations. These policies enable Vietnam to foster open and dynamic cooperation with nations worldwide. Notably, Vietnam has established strategic partnerships with 17 countries and comprehensive partnerships with 13 others. The United States remains the sole permanent member of the United Nations Security Council that has not forged a strategic partnership with Vietnam.

The UVCP, serving as a framework for advancing bilateral cooperation in nine key areas, has transformed Vietnam and the United States into “strong and growing partners, sharing the goal of an open, connected, prosperous, resilient, and peaceful Indo-Pacific.” Given this context, the prospect of upgrading relations this year is not extraordinary. Such an upgrade, whether an SP or CSP, would build upon the UVCP and encompass emerging areas like innovation, technology, climate change response, semiconductor manufacturing, and infrastructure development.

Undoubtedly, the China factor consistently looms over Vietnam–US relations, playing a dual role as a deterrent and an impetus. Whether it functions as a deterrent or motivator depends on China’s actions. Beginning this year, Chinese Coast Guard vessels, for instance, have targeted Vietnamese fishing boats in the Paracel Islands and encroached upon Vietnam’s exclusive economic zone and territorial waters. On 28 August 2023, China released its 2023 version of the controversial “standard map,” featuring a new 10-dash line defining its South China Sea boundaries, infringing on neighboring countries’ sovereignty, including Vietnam’s. Immediate rejections from neighboring nations followed. China’s ongoing aggressive actions in the South China Sea, which pose threats to Vietnam’s strategic interests, provide justifiable reasons for Vietnam to elevate its relations with the United States to the level of SP or CSP.

Good Synergy (Nhân Hòa)

The greatest impediment to Vietnam–US relations is trust, an element that can only be cultivated through goodwill from both sides. On the American front, there are demands for Vietnam to enhance its human rights record as a prerequisite for deepening the bilateral relationship. On the Vietnamese side, suspicion regarding America’s intentions lingers, stemming from the divergent values held by the two political regimes. However, since the establishment of the UVCP with guiding principles centered on “respect for each other’s political systems, independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity,” and following the inaugural meeting between the CPV chief and the US president at the White House in 2015, mutual trust has grown while suspicion has waned.

Enthusiastic support from various quarters in the United States, as assessed by the Vietnamese Ambassador to Washington, presents a synergy propelling both countries toward elevating their relationship to new heights. Notably, both sides seem to have adopted a fresh approach, wherein the human rights issue is compartmentalized from discussions on strategic interests. This shift occurs because the US views Vietnam as “an important partner in global and regional shared efforts to promote peace, stability, and in the response to climate change,” recognizing it as a prominent regional player. Vietnam, in turn, acknowledges the significance of human rights promotion in US foreign policy. To date, the two nations have engaged in 26 dialogues on human rights issues, with the most recent held in Hanoi. Continuing these dialogues “in a constructive and candid manner” represents the most effective means of fostering engagement and building mutual trust to advance shared interests.

Crucially, top-level consensus and support within the CPV for further deepening Vietnam–US ties bear immense significance. General-Secretary Trong, who acts as “the centrality of unity” and assumes “core leadership” within the CPV, has already signaled his endorsement of an upgraded relationship with the United States during his telephone conversation with President Biden in March. The elevation of Vietnam–US relations to the strategic level serves as a testament to what Trong terms Vietnamese Bamboo Diplomacy, an approach aimed at crafting a strategic equilibrium between Vietnam and major powers.

Conclusion

On 17 August 2023, the spokesperson of the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in response to inquiries regarding Vietnam–US relations, stated, “the two sides are discussing measures to further deepen and advance the bilateral relations to a new level when the conditions are right.”

39 “Giá trị đặc sắc của ‘ngoại giao cây cỏ Việt Nam’,” VOV Electronic News.
Indeed, the “right conditions” have arrived. Diplomats on both sides have recognized that US–Vietnam relations have reached a critical juncture, presenting a ripe moment for an upgrade. There is mutual acknowledgment of the significance each holds for the other. Vietnam regards the United States as a pivotal partner in its foreign policy, while the United States views Vietnam as one of the region’s foremost partners, with bipartisan support for strengthening bilateral ties.

President Biden’s impending visit to Hanoi this weekend marks the third opportunity for both countries, and especially for the Biden administration, to translate the elevation initiative into reality. Vietnamese wisdom captures this moment with the saying “quá tam ba bạn,” akin to “third time’s a charm,” anticipating good fortune or success in the third endeavor. The three previously outlined “good elements” engender optimism, even among the most cautious, that a declaration of an SP or CSP by Biden and Trương in Hanoi this weekend is within reach.

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41 Thanh, “Vietnam, US relations have ripened.”