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To cite this article: Nguyen Cong Tung (2022): From former foes to friends: strategic adjustment in America's security policy toward Vietnam and the influence of the China factor, *The Pacific Review*, DOI: [10.1080/09512748.2022.2142273](https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2022.2142273)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2022.2142273>



Published online: 10 Nov 2022.



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From former foes to friends: strategic adjustment in America's security policy toward Vietnam and the influence of the China factor

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ABSTRACT

Relations between the United States and Vietnam have evolved rapidly since their bilateral ties were restored in 1995. One of the factors drawing two former foes closer together is assumed to be their shared concerns over China's rise, particularly China's growing aggressiveness in the South China Sea, where the US and Vietnam both have fundamental interests. This article investigates the US's policy toward Vietnam in terms of security dimension and assesses the extent to which the China factor can influence the pace and scope of cooperation between the two countries. In this article, the US's strengthening its security and defence cooperation with Vietnam these years is labelled as strategic adjustment. This article argues that the US's strategic adjustment toward Vietnam is largely driven by the China factor. The US's positive or negative views of China dictate whether Washington chooses to either stay neutral or lend support to Hanoi amid Vietnam-China tensions.

KEYWORDS South China Sea disputes; strategic adjustment; the China factor; United States; Vietnam

Introduction

On May 24, 2016, at the National Convention Center in Hanoi, U.S. President Barack Obama delivered remarks to more than 2,000 Vietnamese officials, intellectuals, and businessmen (The White House, 2016). His speech highly praised Vietnam's proud history of independence and sovereignty, with reference to a famous 11th-century Vietnamese patriotic poem,¹ which was well received by Vietnamese people. Following Obama's visit was the lifting of a decades-old U.S. lethal arms embargo against Vietnam, a breakthrough in U.S.–Vietnam relations. It is striking that the United States and Vietnam, two former foes, could reach a rapprochement and move toward

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one another so dramatically. An answer to this question can be partially sought from changes in the U.S. regional strategy designed to balance China and its subsequent policy adjustments toward Vietnam.

The United States and Vietnam re-established diplomatic relations on August 5, 1995. During the first decade of normalisation of diplomatic relations, the two sides still lacked trust in each other mostly due to ideological and regime differences (Pham, 2015); thus, U.S.–Vietnam bilateral relationship primarily focused on trade and economic cooperation. Hanoi policymakers were cautious about U.S. intentions since Washington allegedly attempted to conduct peaceful evolution against the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). Also, the US was supposed to require Hanoi to make concessions on issues merely in Washington's interests and did not pay particular attention to the strategic role that Vietnam could play in the region at that time (Nguyen, 2018, pp. 57–58; Pham, 2015).

However, since the Obama administration, U.S.–Vietnam relations have become increasingly cooperative and comprehensive in almost all fields, spanning from political, economic, and security to people-to-people ties. In 2013, both sides upgraded their relationship to the comprehensive partnership level. Since then, U.S.–Vietnam bilateral ties have continued to prosper under the Trump administration and the Biden administration. Several historic events in U.S.–Vietnam relations include Secretary-General of the CPV Nguyen Phu Trong's historic visit to the US in July 2015; the lifting of the arms embargo against Vietnam in May 2016; the Trump–Kim Summit held in Hanoi in February 2019; the U.S. clarifying its stance on the South China Sea disputes (known as the *East Sea* disputes in Vietnamese) in favour of Vietnam in 2020 and 2021, among others. Most recently, the US has donated more than 40 million vaccine doses to Vietnam by the end of September 2022, making it become the largest vaccine donor to Vietnam during the COVID-19 pandemic (USAID, 2022). Notably, in the official diplomatic discourse of the US, Vietnam is now depicted as a trusted or like-minded partner of the US (U.S. Department of State, 2021). To one's surprise, the US could ever use that type of rhetoric in its dealings with a communist state like Vietnam, denoting a remarkable shift in its strategic thinking toward Hanoi.

The U.S. strengthening its relations with Vietnam in recent years is assumed to substantially result from its balancing strategy against China's rise. Luring Vietnam into the U.S. side can be thus leveraged to contain China. However, some argued that saying the China factor is the underlying reason behind U.S.–Vietnam's increasingly close relations is too simplistic, adding that it is Vietnam's growing importance in the economic and strategic architecture of Asia that matters (Siracusa & Nguyen, 2017, p. 420). Although the debates regarding the nature of U.S. policy adjustment

toward Vietnam and the practical role of the China factor in Washington's policy changes remain unresolved, China's attitude or actions regarding U.S.–Vietnam relations merit investigation, since any changes in U.S.–China relations or Vietnam–China relations might affect U.S.–Vietnam relations. Simply put, any changes or adjustments in any one bilateral relationship among these three countries possibly lead to subsequent changes to the relations of the other two dyads. Given this, this article is designed to investigate how the China factor practically shaped and influenced adjustments in U.S. security policy toward Vietnam as well as U.S.–Vietnam relations.

This article argues that U.S. policy toward Vietnam since the Obama administration can be characterised as a strategic adjustment in responding to structural challenges, which presumably refer to the rise of China and its consequential risks to the U.S. global primacy. In this case, the China factor acts as both constraints and catalysts for U.S. policy toward Vietnam in terms of security dimension. More specifically, when U.S. view of China is relatively positive, as demonstrated in the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao eras, and U.S.–China strategic competition is mild, the China factor can act as a constraint in U.S.–Vietnam relations. In contrast, an increasingly negative view of China, coupled with escalating U.S.–China rivalry, has forced the United States to strengthen its relations with Vietnam by lending support or providing inducements to Hanoi. As such, the China factor acts as a catalyst that contributes to promoting U.S.–Vietnam relations. Nevertheless, for the US, interests in its relations with China are much more than those *vis-à-vis* Vietnam. As such, developing relations with Hanoi can be regarded as a means for Washington to better handle its relations with Beijing.

This article adopts qualitative case study and in-depth interview as two specific research methods. The South China Sea dispute is selected as the main case study to investigate the U.S. strategic adjustment in the security domain toward Vietnam. Materials for analysis in this article primarily include the US's national security and defence strategy reports, government documents, public remarks by U.S. officials, existing scholarly works, and policy reports on US–China–Vietnam relations, among others. Furthermore, an in-depth interview with a Vietnamese scholar and diplomat aims to collect first-hand information regarding Vietnam's internal evaluation of the U.S. security policy toward Vietnam.

In the next section, this article conceptualises strategic adjustment and discusses the role of Vietnam amid U.S.–China rivalry. The third section gives a brief overview of the US's policy toward Vietnam. In the fourth section, an in-depth analysis of U.S. security policy adjustments toward Vietnam will be conducted. In this case, the South China Sea disputes, which represent the security dimension, will be investigated. The fifth section assesses the influence of the China factor on the US's security policy

toward Vietnam. The conclusion summarises the key findings of this article and provides some policy implications.

Great power's strategic adjustment toward the small state in an asymmetric structure

The relationship between a great power and a smaller power is characterised by an asymmetric structure, in which relative capabilities are in favour of the larger side. Within this asymmetric structure, expectation and degree of attention toward the bilateral relationship of great power and smaller power are different (Womack, 2016). As for expectation, the smaller side expects the larger to recognise its autonomy for the sake of its interests and identity. Meanwhile, the larger side's expectation is the smaller side's showing deference to its greater capabilities. A mutual expectation of respect from each other is embedded in both autonomy and deference. For the asymmetric relationship to be normal, each side should respect the position of the other (Womack, 2016, pp. 52–53). As for the degree of attention, due to greater exposure to the relationship with the larger, the smaller will be more attentive to this asymmetric relationship. In contrast, the larger is more concerned with its own domestic issues and other relationships of equal in the international system or issues of greater importance, and is thus likely to give less attention to this relationship. Routine attention to the smaller side is both limited and spotty. Since its relationship with the smaller is deemed less important, the larger tends not to invest significant resources in its relationship with the smaller (Womack, 2016, pp. 43–45).

The politics of asymmetric attention described above can affect the foreign policymaking of two sides. It is inferred that policymaking toward the larger side constantly occupies most of the foreign policymaking process of the smaller, and often requires its coordinated national posture, which might involve the participation of top leaders and trigger vast domestic discussions. In contrast, the larger side's foreign policy is often designed to deal with other major powers as well as other structural factors, but not for small states. This article contends that the major concern for many if not most great powers is not whether they should focus their foreign policy on a particular small state. It is, rather, how to map out policies to deal with a particular major power, a whole region, or a specific global issue. For example, as a global hegemon, the United States' primary attention is to maintain its preponderant position in the world and to handle well its relations with other major powers. Its foreign policy acts are designed to facilitate and coordinate Washington's grand strategy since the end of the Cold War, which has four intertwined parts: to be militarily preponderant; to reassure and contain allies; to integrate other states into US-designed

institutions and markets, and to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons (Porter, 2018).

As a result, the US would never signal its support or adjust its policy toward a small state unless there is a clear strategic rationale (Walt, 2018, p. 9). The reason is simple: the bilateral relationship is important to both great power and small power, yet the degree of importance is asymmetric since the matter of survival has rarely been crucial to the great power in its relations with a small power (Knudsen, 1988, p. 112). Rather, threats to the great power's security are primarily from its rival great powers, but not from smaller states (Knudsen, 1988, p. 115). Given this, the larger side's policymaking toward the smaller is mostly driven by its perception of the small state, but not on the small state's own actions. Simply put, if a small state is categorised as a 'friendly' state, then the larger side's attitude and policy will be more tolerable, and vice versa for an 'unfriendly' state. Furthermore, due to its inattention to this relationship and lack of coordinated national posture in managing the relationship with the smaller, the larger side's policy toward the smaller tends to be less consistent and coherent. Rather, a diverse and even contradictory mix of policies will be found in its dealing with the smaller (Womack, 2016, p. 49).

However, there are several cases when the larger side focuses much of its attention on the smaller. They include a crisis that can affect the larger side's security; the smaller side's linkage with a rival external power of the larger; or domestic events in the smaller side that can affect the larger side's domestic politics (Womack, 2016, pp. 47–48). Among these, the smaller side appears especially important and is paid particular attention to when it is linked with other important external powers (Womack, 2016, pp. 48). In this case, the smaller side will likely become a vehicle or a pawn within a major power's strategic chessboard. Particularly, when it comes to great power rivalries, a small state will have greater strategic importance to both great powers including its neighbouring great power and its neighbour's rival great power. A small state's importance does not substantially lie in its actions or abilities, but in its strategic location or strategic value, for its territory can be used as a stepping stone or a gateway for a great power against another one (Knudsen, 1988, p. 115; McManus & Nieman, 2019, p. 372). Consequently, as material capability shifts obviously to one great power side, there will be an increase in another great power's propensity to exert either more pressure on or provide more incentives toward a small state with an eye to seeking support from the smaller.

For example, along with its growth in material capabilities, China has presumably sought to become a regional hegemon in East Asia on an equal footing with the US. However, China's rise poses the risk of collision with the US since China is challenging the U.S. dominant position in East Asia

and seeking to establish a regional geopolitical order in its favour (Layne, 2017, pp. 270–271). John Ikenberry indicated the emergence of a dual hierarchical order, one is China-led economic hierarchy and the other is US-led security hierarchy, as one of the most critical structural changes in Asia with the rapid rise of China's economic and military capabilities (Ikenberry, 2016). In order to yield its regional dominance, the US has taken the lead in coordinating a countervailing coalition against China through a complicated diplomatic, economic, and military endeavor. Toward this end, Washington also seeks to gain support and loyalty from local powers or middle powers, relies on them to contain China, and thus has them share the US's burden of imperial overstretch (Ikenberry, 2016; Layne, 2017; Walt, 2018, pp. 14–15). With their support and endorsement, Washington expects to win more advantages compared to China. It should be noted that if a local power is considered 'friendly' or beneficial to Washington's strategy, more resources toward this smaller power are likely to be allocated. At the same time, policies toward this smaller side will subsequently be adjusted more favourably.

Among local powers in the Indo-Pacific region, Vietnam is depicted as a rising middle power and thus has grown increasingly important in the U.S. regional strategy. The US's growing attention toward Vietnam is supposedly not only driven by the impact of Vietnam itself on American interests but also due to its complicated relations with China that can be leveraged during Washington's strategic competition with Beijing. Hanoi's growing role in Washington's strategy is specifically manifested by its strong stance toward China, the convergence of interests between the US and Vietnam, Vietnam's good relations with U.S. allies and partners in Asia, and Vietnamese people's favourable view of the US (Tung, 2022). For these reasons, the US has been signalling a plethora of support to Vietnam, intending to lure Hanoi into its side. Once Hanoi chooses to lend support or endorsement to the US in various issues, Washington could get the upper hand in its competition with Beijing. At the same time, the US could leverage Vietnam-China tensions to maintain its military presence in the region (Bellacqua, 2012). As a result, the US—the larger side—is willing to invest more resources to its relationship with Vietnam—the smaller—when its tensions with China heat up. In this article, such changes in the larger side's attitude and policy toward the smaller are called strategic adjustment, which possesses some following attributes.

First, it is labelled as strategic adjustment because the adjustment decisions of a great power toward a smaller power are both strategic and tactical. Strategically, adjustment decisions are visionary and conducive to the larger power's overarching strategy. Tactically, these adjustment decisions are practical and responsive enough to lure the smaller power into its

network of protégés states. To this end, the larger might adopt either practical military gestures or non-military gestures to signal that it expects the smaller to remain secure. Nevertheless, it does not truly care about the smaller side's security as it seems, and sometimes some signals are only a bluff from the larger (McManus & Nieman, 2019, pp. 365–366). The larger side's primary security concerns and interests are still about its relations with other great powers (Knudsen, 1988). Thus, signaling support for a small state's security simply serves as a tool for the larger to pursue other strategic goals and better deal with its rival great powers. As such, the larger power's strategic adjustment may not fundamentally change its ultimate policy toward the smaller side in the long run.

Second, a great power may adopt a variety of gestures to signal its support to a small power, from alliances, nuclear deployments, troop deployment in the territory of a protégés, joint military exercises, arms transfers, and leader visits to statements of support. All these acts are driven by an underlying desire to signal support for the smaller side's security (McManus & Nieman, 2019, p. 366, p. 376). However, as for smaller states that do not have a treaty alliance with the great power, as in the case of U.S.–Vietnam relations, specific signals of support that the great power provides for the smaller might be confined to arms transfers, joint military exercises (mostly multilateral drills), leader visits, statements of support, and showing a willingness to beef up the bilateral relationship, among others. Particularly, leadership visits and statements or words of support are arguably most adopted by the great power to its non-allied but increasingly important smaller partners (McManus, 2018).

Third, when adopting strategic adjustment, the larger will temporarily set aside bilateral disputes and ideological discrepancies it has with the smaller side, simply to show its goodwill and benevolence in fostering relations with that target small state. Simply put, the concept of strategic adjustment is highly consistent with the realist logic, which can be used to explain great powers' external actions in times of crisis, war, or strategic competition with other competing states in the international system. As John Mearsheimer stated, when a state is facing threats, it rarely takes the ideology into account once it needs to find an ally (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 48). In the case of the US, as Stephen Walt noted, contrary to its idealistic self-image, the US paid little attention to legal or moral details during its rise to superpower status and in its long competition with the Soviet Union. The fact is Washington never spent much money on foreign aid or human rights, and declined to intervene if there was not a clear strategic reason or a powerful domestic lobby (Walt, 2018, pp. 8–10). This pattern of U.S. strategic adjustment has been adopted and applied to U.S. relations with many non-democratic states in the world including Vietnam. In order

to compete with China, the US would temporarily set aside its ideational mission of transforming an authoritarian Vietnam into a democratic one, while at the same time downplaying the issue of human rights and other sensitive issues, simply to engage more with Hanoi (Tung, 2022).

The greater power's adoption of strategic adjustment toward the small power is mostly driven by its search for security. For the larger side, searching for security means that it is feeling insecure or challenged by other great powers in the international system. It is thus inferred that the larger side's cautiousness or fear of its rival great power's intentions and ambitions is one crucial driving force pushing it to adjust strategically its attitude and policy toward a particular small state. The smaller side might understand its relationship with the larger side is simply the instrumental relations between actors of unequal power and status, and it is being taken advantage of by the larger power. Yet, due to other considerations such as external threats posed by its neighbouring great power, domestic factors, and so on, the smaller side might still show high receptiveness to the larger side's policy adjustment. In other words, in exchange for protection and material aid in times of need, the smaller side will be tempted to not only welcome cooperative acts proposed by the larger, but also lend support, explicitly or implicitly, to the larger in other issues (Handel, 2016, pp. 132–133).

As in the case of U.S.–Vietnam relations, both countries have complex relationships with China, and their mutual interests in mitigating the negative impacts of China's rise in the region have drawn Washington and Hanoi closer together. For the US, improving its relations with Vietnam will serve to undermine China's objectives in East Asia, meanwhile for Vietnam, enhancing its ties with the US gradually and selectively could act as a counterweight against China's growing economic footprint in Vietnam and Beijing's aggressiveness in the South China Sea (Bellacqua, 2012; Tung, 2022). In the following sections, this article will analyse Washington's strategic adjustment of its foreign policy toward Hanoi in terms of security and defence domain, and evaluate how its policies and actions were shaped and constrained by the China factor.

A brief overview of U.S. policy toward Vietnam

Twenty years after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the relations between the US and Vietnam were still almost frozen. The years after the Vietnam War saw an emerging debate in America about its overseas interventions and foreign policy. Brutal experience during the war led to the emergence of the *Vietnam syndrome*—a term that refers to the reluctance of the American public to support U.S. overseas military interventions

without a clear-cut objective. For many if not most Americans, failure in the Vietnam War was considered a disastrous episode in U.S. foreign policy, in part shaping the U.S. pursuit of a more pragmatic foreign policy afterward (Kalb, 2013; Siracusa & Nguyen, 2017).

Attempts to diplomatic relations normalisation were initially made by the two sides only two years after the war had ended. Nevertheless, the normalisation process was suspended due to a plethora of subjective and objective reasons such as Vietnam's mentality of the winner, Sino-Soviet split and Sino-U.S. rapprochement as well as the subsequent Vietnam-Soviet alignment and the worsening of Vietnam-China relations in 1978, Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia in 1979, to name but a few. It was not until July 1995 under the Clinton administration that the normalisation of U.S.-Vietnam diplomatic relations was realised (Nguyen, 2018; Pham, 2015; Siracusa & Nguyen, 2017). Following this was a variety of dynamics in U.S.-Vietnam relations, but almost all were confined to trade and economic activities. Cooperation in other security and defence areas was relatively limited in terms of both speed and scale by the end of the Bush administration (Siracusa & Nguyen, 2017, pp. 411–415).

Relatively slow development in U.S.-Vietnam relations earlier years after the normalisation was allegedly attributed to mutual suspicions and a lack of strategic trust between the two former foes. Many U.S. political elites as well as human rights and religious groups still viewed Vietnam's non-democratic political system as an ideational menace to the US, and thus repeatedly required the U.S. government to pressure Vietnam. Simultaneously, a segment of Vietnamese leaders suspected the US of conducting peaceful evolution through its economic engagement with Vietnam. More recently, the U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in 2017 also made Vietnam concerned about Washington's long-term commitment to the region and Hanoi (Le, 2020; Nguyen, 2018). In addition, the focus of the U.S. strategy also hindered significant improvements in its relations with Vietnam. Much of Washington's attention was projected to the Middle East area, so Southeast Asia was not a priority within the U.S. strategy at that time. As a result, Vietnam's role was indeed neglected for many years in the U.S. strategy (Pham, 2015). Proof of this is that before 2015 there was almost no mention of Vietnam in either *National Security Strategy* or *National Defense Strategy* reports of the United States.

However, the U.S. attitude toward Vietnam started changing in the wake of the Obama administration. Particularly, facing growing challenges posed by the rise of China as well as changes in Asia's geopolitical landscape, the Obama administration characterised its policy toward the Asia-Pacific region as 'Rebalancing' or 'Pivot to Asia' in 2014, which paved the way for allocating more political, economic, and security resources to the region

(Bader, 2014). Since then, Vietnam has been paid more attention to throughout the Obama administration, Trump administration to Biden administration, consecutively. The name 'Vietnam' appeared in the *National Security Strategy* of the Obama and Trump administrations in 2015 and 2017 respectively, and in the *Interim National Security Strategy Guidance* of the Biden administration in 2021 (The White House, 2015a, p. 24, 2017, pp. 46–47, 2021, p. 10). Notably, in the U.S. strategic discourse, Vietnam is currently being labelled as a trusted or like-minded partner of the United States, representing a crucial shift in U.S. strategic thinking and denoting Hanoi's growing importance in Washington's national security.

From 2009 until present, the United States has taken various active steps to deepen its relations with Vietnam in terms of diplomacy, politics, security, and economics. In 2015, CPV Secretary-General Nguyen Phu Trong paid a historic visit to Washington at the invitation of the Obama administration, the very first visit of a CPV Secretary-General to the US. Trong was received with the highest diplomatic designation, and held historic talks with Obama at the Oval Office of the White House. This visit marked a milestone in U.S.–Vietnam relations, since it represented the U.S. implicit recognition of the legitimacy of CPV, according to many Vietnamese strategists (Tung, 2022). In the following year in 2016, President Obama conducted his first official visit to Vietnam. This was the third visit by a sitting U.S. president since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. High-level exchanges continued to expand during the Trump administration, especially the visit of President Trump to Vietnam in 2017 and his declaration of *U.S. Vision for Indo-Pacific* in Da Nang, Vietnam (Tung, 2022). In 2019, Hanoi was chosen to be the destination for holding the Trump-Kim Summit, which once again highlighted the growing U.S. strategic confidence in Hanoi. All these historic events could, to some extent, reflect U.S. strategic adjustment in its policy toward Vietnam.

In Washington's overall strategic adjustment toward Vietnam, the security dimension plays a pivotal role. Nevertheless, U.S.–Vietnam security cooperation has developed much more slowly compared to other areas since normalisation. It was not until 2008 that Washington and Hanoi started the first *U.S.–Vietnam Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue*. In August 2010, the two sides initiated the first *U.S.–Vietnam Defense Policy Dialogue*, while at the same time launching the first annual *U.S.–Vietnam Naval Engagement Activity* (NEA), with a focus on low-level exchanges and exercises (Thayer, 2013). These two dialogues and the NEA are regarded as crucial platforms for discussing, promoting, and implementing bilateral security and defence cooperation between the two countries. Overall, non-traditional security issues such as search and rescue, military medicine, ship-board damage control, and port visit, among others have so far witnessed

the most prominent progress in security and defence cooperation between Washington and Hanoi (Hoang & Thuy, 2016; Dang & Hang, 2019).

In 2011, Washington and Hanoi signed the *Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Advancing Bilateral Defense Cooperation*, which covered 5 important fields including maritime security cooperation, high-level defence dialogues, search and rescue programs, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and the United Nations peacekeeping operations. Though seemingly new, the MOU resembled a summary of security and defence cooperative activities that had taken place even before it was officially signed (Thayer, 2013). Still, the signing of the MOU has indeed laid the foundation for further boosting U.S.–Vietnam security cooperation, which is manifested by increasing numbers of high-level dialogues and visits between the two sides (Hoang & Thuy, 2016, pp. 183–184). In 2015, the two sides upgraded the MOU by adopting *U.S.–Vietnam Joint Statement* with 12 fields of cooperation, which specifically included defence trade and technology transfer (The White House, 2015b). This was considered a breakthrough in U.S.–Vietnam security and defence relations and paved the way for the US to fully lift the lethal arms embargo against Vietnam in the following year. Since then, the two sides have made rapid progress in other security cooperation fields such as arms trading, port visits of U.S. aircraft carriers to Vietnam, and more statements of support from the US to Vietnam. These specific actions in part represent the U.S. strategic adjustment toward Vietnam. However, little has been known about how Washington’s strategic adjustment in security policy has been deployed in practice, and whether the China factor could play a role in these policy adjustment decisions.

South China Sea disputes: a reflection of U.S. strategic adjustment toward Vietnam

In any bilateral relationship, progress in deepening the relationship between two countries must be observed through the scope and substance of their bilateral security and defence cooperation, but not via diplomatic exchange, economic, investment, and trade data (Siracusa & Nguyen, 2017, p. 417). As such, U.S. strategic adjustment toward Vietnam during the last few years can be viewed from its security policy toward Vietnam. Among these, U.S.–Vietnam security and defence relations regarding the South China Sea disputes are best indicative of U.S.–China–Vietnam interactions, and thus can be used to assess the influence of the China factor on U.S. policy toward Vietnam. Over the last few years, the South China Sea dispute has constantly flared up as tensions amongst claimants intensified, particularly those between China and Vietnam as well as between China and the

Philippines. It is not, however, merely a disputed matter of relevant claimants; rather, the SCS disputes involved and drew great attention from the US and international community given its importance to peace and stability, global trade, and freedom of navigation. The *2019 Vietnam National Defence White Paper* particularly noted that the intensifying strategic rivalries between major powers turned the East Sea (or the South China Sea) into a 'flash point' with potential conflicts (Vietnam Ministry of National Defence, 2019, p. 19). As for U.S.–China–Vietnam triangular relationship, SCS disputes display a conflicting feature, that is: there has witnessed an increase in U.S.–Vietnam security and defence cooperation in terms of both scope and substance regarding the SCS, while at the same time manifesting a deterioration and possibility of conflicts between Washington and Beijing in contested waters.

The SCS constitutes a key element in the U.S. global strategy. Hence, although the US is not a claimant over any of the contested land features in this sea, it has constantly paid attention to and is involved in disputed events in the SCS that may threaten its two fundamental and enduring core interests including access and stability (Fravel, 2016). The first and most fundamental interest is to maintain unhindered access to the regional waters. Keeping sea lanes open and unhindered is crucial not only for the U.S. economy, but also the US's ability to project its military power in the region (Fravel, 2016, p. 391; Nguyen, 2016, p. 392). Thus, Washington does not expect Beijing to claim Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) from islands it controlled in the SCS and enforce its concept of freedom of the seas from these islands (Nguyen, 2016, p. 393). The second U.S. interest in the SCS is related to the maintenance of regional peace and stability that is favourable to the U.S. primacy in the Western Pacific. To this end, the US has sought to sustain a military balance in the region, which consists of maintaining the U.S. Navy's ability to control waters in the Western Pacific as well as countering China's anti-access, area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities (Fravel, 2016, pp. 391–392; Nguyen, 2016, p. 394).

Given this, Washington's SCS policy has been largely dictated and driven by its above two core interests. The primary content of its SCS policy is to serve its interests and respond to factors that might threaten these interests (Fravel, 2016). The U.S. inaugural public policy regarding the SCS disputes was released by the U.S. Department of State on May 10, 1995, entitled, *U.S. Policy on Spratly Islands and South China Sea*. There were five elements in this document including peaceful resolution of disputes, peace and stability, freedom of navigation, neutrality over the sovereignty question, respect of maritime norms such as the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Fravel, 2016, p. 393; Pedrozo, 2022, p. 74). Among these, the fourth element was regarded as the most important one,

clearly stating that *the United States takes no position on the legal merits of the competing claims to sovereignty over the various islands, reefs, atolls, and cays in the South China Sea.* (Fravel, 2016, p. 393).

The 1995 policy framework remained almost unchanged for decades and was assumed to be no longer effective in dealings with new challenges posed by China's aggressive actions over the last few years in the region (Pedrozo, 2022, p. 74). China's behaviours posed a great challenge to U.S. interests in the SCS as well as the established international rules-based order. As a result, Washington had to strategically adjust its SCS policy, which was characterised by two statements on SCS in July 2020 and August 2021, respectively. These two statements commonly regarded the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s claims to offshore resources across most of the SCS as completely unlawful, and highlighted the need to stand with Southeast Asian countries, inclusive of Vietnam, to protect their sovereignty and face the Chinese coercion (U.S. Department of State, 2020b, 2021). However, these revised policies do not substantially affect the existing U.S. position of not taking sides on the competing claims to the SCS islands as reflected in the 1995 policy statement (Pedrozo, 2022, p. 80). Thus, this article argues that they are highly indicative of U.S. strategic adjustment toward the SCS disputes in particular and Vietnam in general.

U.S. strategic adjustment has been manifested through both statements or words and actions. Firstly, the U.S. stance and attitude regarding a specific disputed incident between Vietnam and China reflected its view of China at a particular time. As the view of China was generally positive, its stance tended to be mild and soft, and the room for policy re-adjustment was constrained during the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao eras. Meanwhile, when China was viewed negatively by both Republicans and Democrats, the U.S. position tended to be tougher on China and more supportive of Vietnam. The most conspicuous example can be found in differences in U.S. attitudes toward disputed incidents of the same nature between Vietnam and China in the SCS. In 2007, China deployed a plethora of aggressive actions against Vietnam in the SCS including detaining four Vietnamese fishing boats operating in the Spratlys in April, and firing on a Vietnamese fishing boat, killing one sailor in July (Storey, 2008). However, the US made no statements on these incidents. Yet, with regard to a similar incident of a Chinese coast guard vessel ramming and sinking a Vietnamese fishing boat near the Paracels in April 2020, both the U.S. Department of State and Department of Defense respectively expressed serious concerns and condemned Chinese actions, while at the same time expressing support for a partner like Vietnam (U.S. Department of State, 2020a, U.S. Department of Defense, 2020).

Another example is that the US became the first country to express concerns over Chinese provocative action of moving its drilling rig into Vietnam's EEZ in May 2014, often known as the *HD-981 incident* in the Vietnamese setting, which triggered a strong response from Vietnam and brought Vietnam-China relations back to their lowest ebb in years (BBC News, 2014). Furthermore, both the state and defence department also expressed strong concerns over China's geological survey activity and its interference with Vietnam's long-standing oil and gas activities around the Vanguard Bank in July 2019 (U.S. Department of State, 2019). In comparison, the US displayed a much more low-key response to a similarly serious incident of that nature when Chinese patrol boats harassed Vietnamese seismic survey vessels, *Binh Minh 02* and *Viking II*, and cut their exploration cables two times in May and June 2011, respectively. This incident caused a vehement response from Vietnam and subsequently led to 11 weeks of protests in the summer of 2011 in Vietnam (Hoang, 2019, pp. 9–12).

In addition to clarifying stance on the SCS in favour of Vietnam, the US has adopted specific actions to demonstrate its strategic adjustment toward Hanoi since the end of 2013 such as arms and maritime facilities transfer, conduction of freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) and port calls, high-level exchanges, inviting Vietnam to US-led joint military drills, among others. The most substantial progress in U.S.–Vietnam security relations has to do with arms transfer and maritime capacity building. For example, on December 16, 2013, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in a visit to Vietnam announced that the US would provide Vietnam with five fast patrol vessels worth \$18 million in 2014 to deploy rapidly for search and rescue, disaster response, and other activities. U.S. assistance to Vietnam was above half of its total amount of assistance of \$32.5 million to the whole Southeast Asian region (U.S. Department of State, 2013). This generous act followed almost immediately after China's series of provocative behaviours in the East China Sea and the South China Sea. To be specific, China announced the establishment of the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) on November 23, 2013 (BBC News, 2013). Two weeks later on December 5, 2013, the Chinese aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, accompanied by two missile destroyers and two missile frigates, made its first voyage in the SCS from its home base in Qingdao. Notably, according to the U.S. Navy, the Chinese vessel nearly collided with the American ship at a distance of less than 200 yards (Perlez, 2013). China's aggressiveness increased tensions between Washington and Beijing and motivated the former to strategically adjust its security policy toward Hanoi. In his remarks in Hanoi, Kerry clearly referred to China by stating that, *peace and stability in the South China Sea is a top priority for us and for countries in the region. We are very concerned by and*

strongly opposed to coercive and aggressive tactics to advance territorial claims. (Johnson, 2013).

By first partially lifting in 2014 and then fully lifting the lethal arms embargo against Vietnam in 2016, a growing number of U.S. arms and facilities have been provided to Vietnam. Traditionally, Russia has been the primary arms provider to Vietnam; however, the percentage of arms imports from Russia has been on the decline as Vietnam has been seeking to diversify its arms supplies in the last few years during its military modernisation process. Statistically, according to the *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute* (SIPRI), between 1995 and 2014, arms from Russia cost Vietnam US\$4,95 billion out of its US\$5,49 billion, accounting for 90.2% of Hanoi's total arms imports. The balance came from Ukraine (US\$227 million, 4.13%), Belarus (US\$60 million, 1.1%), and others. Yet, during this period, no arms imports from the US were recorded. Between 2015 and 2021, Vietnam purchased US\$2,45 billion from Russia, the proportion fell to 68.4% of Hanoi's total arms imports. Meanwhile, imports from other countries in terms of both turnover and proportion, started increasing considerably, particularly Israel (US\$492 million, 13.7%), Belarus (US\$203 million, 5.7%), South Korea (US\$120 million, 3.3%), and others. Among those, the US, from no arms trading records with Vietnam before 2014, has now become the fifth largest arms provider to Vietnam, with an import amount of US\$108 million, accounting for 3% of Vietnam's total arms imports (SIPRI, 2022).

Arms procurement from the US, on the one hand, helped Vietnam reduce excessive dependence on a sole-source provider; on the other, enhancing Hanoi's maritime capabilities and maritime law enforcement operations in front of Beijing. Apart from fast patrol boats, through the US *Excess Defense Articles* (EDA) program, the US transferred two Hamilton-class cutters, the *Morgenthau* and the *John Midgett*, to the Vietnam Coast Guard (VCG) in May 2017 and June 2021, respectively. These two cutters were subsequently renamed *CSB8020* and *CSB8021* and became the two largest commissioned cutters of the VCG (Vu, 2021). It should be noted that the US EDA program was designed to offer excess military equipment to U.S. partners and allied countries to support their military and security modernisation, denoting Vietnam being a priority on the list. In a visit to Vietnam in May 2015, after U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter physically saw a Vietnamese Coast Guard vessel damaged by Chinese ships during the *HD-981 incident* in 2014, he announced that Vietnam would receive more funds to acquire US-made patrol vessels to enhance its maritime enforcement capabilities (Hoang & Thuy, 2016, p. 184). Plus, after handing over the second cutter for Vietnam, U.S. defence official, Admiral Karl L. Schultz reiterated that Vietnam is a critical partner of the US in Southeast Asia, and

expected that two Hamilton-class cutters could promote rules-based international order, which is also in the U.S. interests (Duy, 2021). More importantly, Schultz's and Carter's remarks conveyed a message that U.S. military assistance to Vietnam is to help it counter China's aggressiveness in the SCS.

Another important piece of evidence for U.S.–Vietnam's strengthening security relations is several joint maritime efforts including *Naval Engagement Activity* (NEA) and the *Rim of the Pacific Exercise* (RIMPAC). The NEA between the US and Vietnam was first launched in August 2010 and held annually, with a focus on low-level exchanges and exercises such as skills exchanges in military medicine, search and rescue, and port visits. Yet, NEA activities have become increasingly diverse with longer days ashore and at sea, and more complicated activities such as practicing the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) with the participation of navy ships from two countries. The 2017 NEA Vietnam was held at Cam Ranh International Port, Khanh Hoa Province for the first time, instead of being based more than 300 miles north in Da Nang like previous drills (Hlavac, 2017). For RIMPAC, the US invited Vietnam to join the military exercise in 2012, 2016, 2018, and 2020. Hanoi sent observers to the event in 2012 and 2016, and first dispatched 8 naval personnel to participate in the 2018 RIMPAC. Notably, prior to the 2018 RIMPAC exercise, the US decided to withdraw its invitation to China on May 24, 2018, with reference to China's first-ever landing of H-6K bomber aircraft at Woody Island of Paracel Islands on May 18, 2018, as well as other provocative acts in the SCS such as deploying anti-ship missiles, surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems, and electronic jammers to contested features in the Spratly Islands (Naval Today, 2018). Inviting Vietnam while suddenly excluding China from the event, demonstrated that Washington sought to engage more with Hanoi, while at the same time antagonising and further isolating China.

Since 2014, given unprecedented threats from China, there has been an obvious increase in the U.S. military presence in the SCS, which is demonstrated by the frequency of FONOPs and aircraft carrier port visits to Vietnam. In the last 2 years of the Obama administration, the US conducted 4 FONOPs within the 12-nautical-mile area covered by China's artificial islands in the SCS, compared to 26 FONOPs under the Trump administration. The Biden administration has continued FONOPs since January 2021 (Pedrozo, 2022, p. 78). These FONOPs, on the one hand, help to promote the freedom of navigation and consolidate rules-based international order in the U.S. favour; on the other, indirectly rejecting China's claims and contributing to strengthening Vietnam's claims, and thus have been viewed positively by the Vietnamese side (Tung, 2022).

Furthermore, as part of the U.S. strategy to uphold freedom of navigation, two aircraft carriers, USS Carl Vinson and USS Theodore Roosevelt, made port visits to Da Nang in March 2018 and March 2020, respectively. These two visits bore important meaning to U.S.–Vietnam relations since they underscore substantial progress in maritime security cooperation between the two sides. The reason is that in the previous visit by USS John C. Stennis in 2009, and visits by USS George Washington in 2010, 2011, and 2012, U.S. aircraft carriers had to dock at international waters more than 200 nautical miles far from Vietnam’s coast (Dang & Hang, 2019, p. 130). But, as for port calls in 2018 and 2020, U.S. aircraft carriers anchored off the coast of Da Nang, which could be viewed ashore. The 2020 visit was especially important for Washington, since it was made during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the deterioration of U.S.–Philippines relations. More specifically, Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte announced to the United States embassy in Manila that he was terminating the *Visiting Force Agreement* between the Philippines and the US on February 11, 2020, intending to seek closer relations with China, and that could greatly change the balance of power in the SCS to the U.S. detriment but in China’s favour (The Guardian, 2020). Against this backdrop, the role of Vietnam stood out in Washington’s SCS strategy, and being able to make a port call to Vietnam in that context could help the US convey a message to China that the US would not stop its presence in the SCS because of the deepening relationship between Manila and Beijing.

Assessing the influence of the China factor: constraints and catalysts

The U.S. strategic adjustment toward Vietnam in terms of security and defence sphere is manifested through both statements of support and specific actions including transferring arms and maritime facilities to Vietnam, increasing maritime interactions via port calls, engaging Vietnam in the US-led military exercises, and so on. These substantial developments in the U.S. security policy toward a non-allied partner like Vietnam have exceeded the expectations of many people. According to a Hanoi-based scholar and diplomat, U.S. policy adjustment toward Vietnam is an integral part of its larger policy adjustment toward China and the Asia-Pacific region as a whole, in which Vietnam is a focal point given its strategic value in the region, its growing role and influence in the regional economic and security architecture such as its role in ASEAN, its status as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, and other multilateral platforms and efforts. Furthermore, there is a growing convergence of interests between the two countries in a variety of security issues such as upholding a rules-

based international order and maintaining freedom of navigation and aviation in the South China Sea, maintaining a strong and unified ASEAN, among others. This contributed greatly to driving the US to make more security policies in Hanoi's interest.²

Besides, U.S.–Vietnam security relations have also benefited a lot from various positive 'spill-over' effects of other factors, as indicated by extant literature. Hoang and Thuy (2016) contended that recent developments in security relations are attributed to closer and deeper cooperation in other areas such as trade and investment, people-to-people exchanges, and positive public opinion, to name but a few. At the same time, Vietnam's relatively good relations with the U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific region such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines, also create a firm foundation for the two sides to enhance strategic trust and broaden the scope of their security and defence cooperation with a third country (Hoang & Thuy, 2016, p. 187).

While all of the above-mentioned factors have different impacts on the U.S. security policy toward Vietnam, they are insufficient to push the US to adopt an obvious strategic adjustment like today without the influence of the China factor. That said, changes in the perception of China threats to the US's security largely dictate whether or not the US makes a more decisive move toward Vietnam. From the examples analysed in the fourth section of this article, the China factor seems to be associated with many if not all U.S. security and defence policies regarding Vietnam. This article argues that China's actions and behaviours have influenced the pace and scope of U.S. policy toward Vietnam, which can be regarded as both constraints and catalysts. As the catalysts outnumber the constraints, the US will be prompted to adjust its policy strategically and tactically toward Vietnam to better deal with China.

Washington would prefer to keep the pace and scope of cooperation with Hanoi in an incremental and acceptable manner if China's actions and behaviours did not substantially threaten U.S. interests, and the PRC was still perceived positively and optimistically within the US. This perception of China was generally positive during the U.S. decades-long engagement policy toward China starting from the Nixon administration, because many, both Republicans and Democrats, still held the belief that China would turn into a responsible stakeholder as expected (Wyne, 2020). Additionally, deep engagement with China brought huge benefits for both Beijing and Washington; hence, Washington would try to avoid damaging bilateral relations with Beijing for a long time. In this regard, the China factor is called a constraint to U.S.–Vietnam relations, and a barrier to further cooperation between Washington and Hanoi, especially in terms of security matters (Bellacqua, 2012).

Given this, the U.S. attitude toward the SCS disputes was relatively muted for a long time when its relations with China were overall stable. Evidence is that the U.S. SCS statement released in May 1995 remained almost unchanged for decades despite discrepancies between the two sides regarding the SCS matters. And even if it was the case, they would be dealt with properly and quickly in different diplomatic settings between Washington and Beijing such as U.S.–China Military Dialogue, U.S.–China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED). When it came to disputed incidents in the SCS between Vietnam and China, which were considered indirectly linked to U.S. interests, the US often chose to look on unconcerned. Although it lent support to neither Beijing nor Hanoi, Washington prioritised its dealings with Beijing, and thus chose to stay neutral or silent in order not to infuriate Beijing in such cases. For example, a series of China's harassment and detainment of Vietnamese fishermen within Vietnam's EEZs in 2007 as well as the incident of China's cutting of Vietnamese exploration ship cables in 2011 both triggered vehement public protests in Vietnam; nevertheless, the US did not announce any public statements and chose to stay aside in these Sino-Vietnam disputes. Noticeably, these incidents between Vietnam and China in the SCS occurred just several days before or after important events between the US and China. For instance, the cable-cutting incident on May 26, 2011 happened after the U.S.–China Strategic and Economic Dialogue had just been completed in Washington on May 10 (China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

Another likewise example was the U.S. indecisive behaviour during the Philippines-China Scarborough crisis in 2012. During that time, the US sought to improve its relations with China, so it chose to stand aside from conflicts between China and other claimants. As such, the Obama administration did not act decisively to defend the interests of its closest ally in Southeast Asia—the Philippines during the Scarborough crisis. With this ambivalent attitude, the US did not risk damaging its then-stable relationship with China, while at the same continuing to engage China in other issues for Washington's benefit. Consequently, this incident further strengthened the Vietnamese strategists' perception that the US would not protect Vietnam's and other smaller claimants' interests in maritime disputes with China if Washington could reach a specific compromise with Beijing.³

More strikingly, even if conflicts happened between the US and China, or tensions between Vietnam and China were relevant to U.S. interests in the SCS, the US would prioritise a compromise to quickly cover up discrepancies between Washington and Beijing. For example, after the inadvertent collision between a U.S. Navy EP-3 reconnaissance plane and a Chinese F-8 fighter in the SCS, causing the death of one Chinese pilot, who collided

with the U.S. spy plane on April 1, 2001, Sino-U.S. relations spiraled into a deadlock for 11 days. Upon the Chinese side's demand for a formal apology as a condition for releasing 24 detained U.S. aircrew, accused of illegally making the emergency landing on Hainan Island without prior permission from China after the accident, Washington eventually made a compromise by stating that the U.S. government was very sorry for the loss of the Chinese pilot in a letter sent to China on April 11. By doing so, the bilateral relations quickly resumed as the Chinese side regarded this as a 'letter of apology' (*zhiqian xin*) (China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021; The Guardian, 2001).

In contrast, if China's actions exceed the US's acceptable range, and are likely to threaten U.S. interests in the SCS, the pace and scope of cooperation between the US and Vietnam will be both quickened and broadened. This is demonstrated by changing U.S. perception of China in recent years. Simply put, growth in material capabilities has not led China to undertake political liberalisation; in contrast, the Chinese Communist Party is tightening its grip on domestic politics. At the same time, China has sought to translate its economic growth into military power, which poses great challenges to U.S. global hegemony (Wyne, 2020). Thus, there has been a consensus among both Republicans and Democrats since the Trump administration that a recalibration of policy toward China is urgently needed (Wyne, 2020, pp. 42–43). In this case, the China factor can be regarded as a catalyst in U.S.–Vietnam relations, since the US has started paying more attention to and investing in deepening relations with Vietnam to contain China.

Changes in the overarching views of China subsequently lead to reassessment in the US regarding the SCS, where it has fundamental interests, but is now facing a variety of challenges from China. The emerging challenges primarily include China's aggressive actions in the SCS such as the large-scale reclamation of seven outposts in the Spratly Islands and the subsequent militarisation of these reclaimed islands, the People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN)'s unsafe and unprofessional interference with the US's and other countries' military ships and aircraft operating in international waters and airspace in the SCS, China's refusal of *The South China Sea Arbitration* of the Arbitral Tribunal, to name but a few (Pedrozo, 2022, pp. 75–76). Plus, the US gradually realised that China's previous commitments regarding the SCS disputes have no longer been of value. In a visit to the US in September 2015, Chinese President told U.S. President Obama while they were walking in the White House Rose Garden that China would not militarise the SCS. Yet, to the US's disappointment, China is doing contrarily (Wyne, 2020, p. 41).

Against this backdrop, the US has supposedly mapped out a more active strategy that is inclusive of Vietnam and other smaller claimants, aiming to deter China from taking further provocative actions. Vietnam is particularly assumed to be the most natural partner for the US because of its convergence of interests in the SCS with Washington, its strong stance toward China, as well as its growing maritime capabilities compared to other Southeast Asian countries, according to the U.S. strategists (Kurlantzick, 2018). As such, Vietnam is an ideal objective for the US's deployment of its strategic adjustment, with the view of dealing with China in the context of U.S.–China multi-layer strategic competition. From the rationalist viewpoint, U.S. strategic adjustment to Vietnam must be first and foremost focused on areas that are highly compatible with Vietnam's interests. Only by doing this can the US draw Vietnam's attention and seek Vietnam's greater involvement. As such, the SCS dispute, which is closely linked to Vietnam's national security and interests, has witnessed the most conspicuous adjustment within U.S. overall policy regarding Vietnam.

As mentioned in the previous section, since 2014, various specific actions including arms transfer, high-level exchanges, port calls, joint drills, and so on, by the US to beef up U.S.–Vietnam defence relations intending to balance China in the SCS have been observed. While these activities underscore the deepening and diverse relationship between Washington and Hanoi, many of them were in fact driven by the China factor. When U.S.–China relations were exacerbated clearly, the US was more prompted to show its goodwill to Vietnam. In 2018, then-U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis made two visits to Vietnam in January and October, which was considered very unusual in the visiting arrangement of an American defence secretary to a non-allied partner like Vietnam. After the January visit was the historical port call visit of a U.S. aircraft carrier to Vietnam in March, while the October visit came after Mattis canceled his visit to China due to rising trade and defence tensions between Washington and Beijing (Burns, 2018).

As tensions in trade and defence issues between Washington and Beijing linger, and China has stopped at nothing but continued its militarisation of reclaimed islands in the SCS, the U.S. words and actions regarding the SCS disputes have subsequently increased in terms of both frequency and level, which were not seen previously during the period of stable U.S.–China relations. Particularly, the US's words and actions rose steadily each time after it had had conflicts with China in other spheres, or when China had conflicts with Vietnam and other claimants in the SCS. As discussed above, the US became the first country to express concerns regarding China's provocative actions against Vietnam in the 2014 *HD-981 incident*, the 2019 Vanguard Bank incident, and the 2020 Vietnamese fishing

boat sinking incident. Besides condemning Chinese actions, the US also showed practical support for Vietnam by announcing specific military cooperation between Washington and Hanoi during the time of these incidents. Compared to that, the U.S. words and actions were almost absent in similar incidents occurring in the past between Vietnam and China.

While the US's words and actions seem to be beneficial for Vietnam and are in line with Hanoi's strategy of internationalising the SCS disputes, they are, more precisely speaking, designed to engage Vietnam and other smaller claimants into a US-led coalition or a united front against China. For example, the year 2020 saw an obvious deterioration of U.S.–China relations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The US accused China of expanding its aggressiveness in the SCS at the expense of other countries while they were fighting against the pandemic. China's provocative actions included sinking a Vietnamese fishing boat near the Paracels in early April; announcing the establishment of the Xisha and Nansha Districts under Sansha City on April 18 to expand its administrative capacity in the SCS; the Ministry of Civil Affairs of China's announcing the naming of a new batch of islands and reefs as well as submarine features in the SCS one day later on April 19 (China Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2020a, 2020b). In further steps, China conducted military exercises around the Paracels and designated the exercise area as a no-fly and no-navigation area during the drilling time on July 1–7 and August 24–29, 2020. In the second drill in August, China even deployed H-6J bombers to Woody Island in the Paracels (Military Watch Magazine, 2020; Vu, 2020). With regard to all of the above incidents, the US expressed serious concerns about the rising tensions in the SCS, condemned China's provocative behaviours, and lent endorsement to Vietnam and other relevant claimants.

Most importantly, in response to a series of unprecedented threats from China, the US revised its SCS policy by releasing a statement entitled, the *U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea* on 13 July, 2020, which made clear that China's claims were completely unlawful. Notably, the statement wrote that, *the United States rejects any PRC maritime claim in the waters surrounding Vanguard Bank (off Vietnam), Luconia Shoals (off Malaysia), waters in Brunei's EEZ, and Natuna Besar (off Indonesia)*. (U.S. Department of State, 2020b). Afterward, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee jointly reiterated China's unlawful claims in the SCS on July 13, 2020 (The Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2020). This revised version of SCS policy continued to be maintained by the Biden administration. On August 9, 2021, in remarks to the UN Security Council on the importance of maritime security and the maintenance of international peace and security, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken expressed concerns over *actions that intimidate and bully*

other states from lawfully accessing their maritime resources, with an implicit reference to China (U.S. Department of State, 2021). These two statements represent a more active approach to the SCS disputes, and revisions in America's SCS policy are in line with its position with the Tribunal's rulings regarding the PRC's maritime claims in 2016 (Pedrozo, 2022).

These two SCS statements of the US are undoubtedly designed to counter China's aggressiveness, which is threatening Washington's fundamental interests of freedom of navigation, peace, and stability in the SCS. The two statements were well received by smaller claimants, especially those mentioned in the 2020 statement. One day after the first U.S. statement had been released, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Le Thi Thu Hang in a press conference said that Vietnam welcomed countries to express their positions and views on the South China Sea issue based on international law (Dang, 2020). Though beneficial to Vietnam's maritime claims in the SCS as it seems, these two statements as well as the mentioning of Vietnam and other smaller claimants in these statements are simply a means to serve the interests of Washington. In other words, by mentioning the name of Vietnam and other claimants in its official statement, the US created a *fait accompli* united front between Washington and other countries to counter China's malign behaviours, regardless of these claimants' willingness. By intentionally engaging Vietnam in its united front, Washington can also take advantage of Vietnam in its competition with China, by means of either helping Hanoi further strengthen its maritime capabilities or exerting pressure on Hanoi to make decisive moves regarding the SCS disputes. For example, in a visit to Hanoi on August 25, 2021, U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris noted during a meeting with Vietnamese President Nguyen Xuan Phuc that the US would work closely with Vietnam to uphold freedom of navigation under international law, and urged Hanoi to raise the pressure on Beijing's actions and to challenge its bullying and excessive maritime claims (BBC Vietnamese, 2021).

Nevertheless, while the US strategically adjusted its SCS policy to show its goodwill to Vietnam and other states as demonstrated in several revisions in the two statements, a fundamental principle of not taking sides in the SCS disputes remains unchanged (Pedrozo, 2022). Furthermore, the two U.S. statements also failed to take a position on possible maritime zones generated by the Paracel Islands, which can leave open the possibility for the PRC to claim a two-hundred nautical mile EEZ from these features (Pedrozo, 2022, p. 92). In short, the U.S. statements and actions regarding the SCS in recent years vividly represented Washington's strategic adjustment of policy toward Vietnam. U.S. strategic adjustment toward Vietnam should be viewed from its global strategy of containing China, and in many cases, the U.S. words and actions in support of Vietnam, are used to send

particular signals to China. Alternatively put, leveraging U.S.–Vietnam relations would greatly undermine China’s objectives in the SCS in particular and in Southeast Asia in general. At the same time, a strengthened U.S.–Vietnam relationship possibly triggers more Vietnam-China tensions, and thus the US can leverage this to legitimise its sustained military presence in the region.

Conclusion

U.S.–Vietnam relations have prospered steadily in the past few years in almost all fields of cooperation, from politics, security, and trade, to people-to-people exchanges. While the economic relations between the two sides continue growing dramatically, security and defence cooperation has also witnessed significant improvements, reflecting substantial progress in the relationship between Washington and Hanoi. Hardly could one believe that the bilateral relationship has been restored and ever evolved like today from the heritage of two former foes in the Vietnam War. Both Washington and Hanoi have used positive diplomatic rhetoric to address each other. While the US called Vietnam its ‘like-minded and trusted partner’, Vietnam regarded the US as one of its ‘most crucial partners’.

For the US, the deepening of its relationship with Vietnam has gained bipartisan consensus; yet, it was not until in the wake of the *Asia Rebalancing Strategy* in the second term of the Obama presidency that the US paid more attention to the strategic role of Vietnam in its global strategy. According to the assessment of American strategists, Vietnam’s importance in the U.S. strategy is represented by three aspects: location, geopolitics, and strategy. Regarding location, Vietnam is adjacent to China and right next to the most important shipping lane in the world. Regarding geopolitics, Vietnam is one of the most powerful countries in terms of defence in the SCS. In terms of strategy, Vietnam’s importance stems from the Pentagon’s calculation that there are two Asias: mainland Asia and island Asia. While the US already has strong island allies such as Japan, Korea, and Australia, it still has no strong allies in mainland Asia. Thus, Vietnam can fill this vacancy (Nguyen, 2022). Along with the strategic competition with China, the significance of Vietnam in U.S. strategy in terms of the above three aspects has even been more prominent.

Against this backdrop, the US has sought to deepen its relations with Vietnam and leverage strengthened U.S.–Vietnam relations to better deal with China. In this article, U.S. proactive actions to beef up relations with Vietnam, particularly in terms of security and defence areas, are labelled as strategic adjustment. This article took the South China Sea disputes as a case study to investigate adjustments or changes in U.S. policy toward

maritime disputes in general and Vietnam in particular. As stated previously, substantial progress in any bilateral relationship must be observed from improvements in security and defence cooperation. The relationship between the US and Vietnam is no exception. Plus, to review progress in U.S.–Vietnam security relations, the SCS dispute is a good case study, for it is closely associated with the security and interests of the US, China, and Vietnam, and can best represent U.S.–Vietnam security and defence interactions.

This article found that U.S. policy regarding the SCS disputes exemplifies Washington's strategic adjustment toward Vietnam. Rather than totally supporting Vietnam or fundamentally changing its SCS policy, the US simply adjusts strategically and tactically its stance and actions to show goodwill to Vietnam, ultimately intending to counter China's threats in the SCS that might harm Washington's interests. Accordingly, U.S. policy toward Vietnam regarding the SCS disputes might be adjusted contingent upon Washington's relations with Beijing in a particular period. Simply put, the US's words and actions were neutral and mild given that its relations with China were relatively stable in the eras of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. In contrast, as the U.S.–China rivalry has been intensifying during the last few years, Washington has hardened its stance and actions toward China, while at the same time showing more support and endorsement toward Vietnam in the disputed incidents between China and Vietnam in the SCS such as the 2014 *HD-981 incident*, the 2019 Vanguard Bank confrontation incident, among others. In addition to words and stance in favour of Vietnam's claims in the SCS disputes, the US also took specific actions to help Vietnam strengthen its maritime capabilities such as transferring arms and naval ships, making port visits to Vietnam, conducting FONOPs in the SCS, engaging Vietnam in US-led naval drills such as RIMPAC, and others. All these further steps not only strengthen Vietnam's strategic trust in the US, but also help to send U.S. strong signals to China as well as legitimise its presence in the SCS.

The findings of this article offer both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it indicates that the influence of asymmetrical structure on great-small state relations is ever-present. Since the greater power tends to pay more attention to other great powers, its strategic adjustment to a particular small state likely results from structural changes in its relations with another rival great power. In this case, it is undeniable that Vietnam's taking initiative in promoting security and defence relations with the US also plays an important role in promoting Washington's adoption of strategic adjustment. Nevertheless, this article argues that if this is not combined with the China factor, then it will be tougher and takes a longer time for the US to adjust its policy toward Vietnam. For example, despite

Vietnam's lobbying for many years for the US to lift its arms embargo against Vietnam, it was not until 2014 that the partial lift was realised. It should be noted that the decision of partial lifting presumably resulted from a series of China's aggressive actions in both the East and South China Sea that antagonised the US in 2013.

Practically, this article has important policy implications for policy-makers as well as strategists in small states. Analyses from this article reflect a reality that U.S. interests in relations with China outweigh its interests in relations with Vietnam; hence, Washington would always prioritise its dealings with Beijing rather than with Hanoi. As such, any adjustment or change in U.S. policy toward Vietnam is not merely linked with U.S.–Vietnam bilateral relations; rather, in many cases, it serves as leverage to better deal with China. Thus, what Hanoi should do is to keep strengthening its security and defence cooperation with Washington, while at the same time calibrating strategic objectives of its own and maintaining an independent and multi-lateral foreign policy line.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. *"The Southern emperor rules the Southern land. Our destiny is writ in Heaven's Book."* The poem, widely known as Vietnam's first Declaration of Independence, was read during the Ly-Song war in 1077 by Ly Thuong Kiet, a general and admiral of the Ly dynasty of Vietnam.
2. Interview with a Vietnamese scholar and diplomat, Hanoi, August 24, 2022.
3. Interview with a Vietnamese scholar and diplomat, Hanoi, August 24, 2022.

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