

Vietnam's Bamboo Diplomacy

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Vietnam's bamboo diplomacy approach helps Hanoi to navigate the tricky waters of Indo-Pacific geopolitics while defending its sovereignty.

From the American perspective, a secure and prosperous Vietnam that can defend its interests is advantageous.

U.S.-Vietnam defense cooperation including (among other things) the Vietnam Wartime Accounting Initiative, FMS/FMF, training, and port visits should be expanded.

Overview and History

Vietnam's foreign policy in recent years has been highlighted for its unique approach to dealing with competing global powers, often referred to as "bamboo diplomacy." Coined in the modern Vietnamese context by former Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, who passed away in July 2024, this diplomatic strategy "draws its essence from the **bamboo plant**, a powerful cultural symbol in Vietnam representing **resilience, flexibility, and independence**." Just as bamboo "has strong roots, a sturdy trunk, and adaptable branches," bamboo diplomacy "emphasizes a firm stance on **national sovereignty** while remaining flexible enough to navigate complex global geopolitics."¹

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This metaphor encapsulates how Vietnam navigates complex geopolitical situations such as the power struggle between the U.S. and China and heightened tensions in the South China Sea. The essence of bamboo diplomacy lies in national sovereignty, strategic balance, and pragmatism.

Bamboo diplomacy reflects a departure from Cold War-era alignments and a movement toward a more multifaceted, diversified foreign policy approach for Hanoi. In a way, this is a continuation of the 1986 Doi Moi reforms that aimed to shift from a centrally planned economy to a social-ist-oriented market economy integrated with the world economy and more open to engagement beyond Vietnam's traditional partners.² These reforms promoted economic liberalization and focused on opening the Vietnamese market, but their impact was felt across all aspects of governance, including foreign policy, as Vietnam shifted from isolationism to economic integration and diplomatic engagement.³ Vietnam moved to repair ties with former adversaries including the U.S. in 1995 and China in 1991.⁴ It also became a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995 and the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2006.⁵

Bamboo Diplomacy Today

Core Principles. Looking since the bamboo diplomatic strategy was announced in 2016, Vietnam diplomacy rests on several interlinked principles: independence and sovereignty, multilateralism and diversification, balance and non-alignment.⁶

First, Vietnam relies on an independent foreign policy. It avoids formal alliances that could compromise autonomy and refrains from hosting foreign military bases.⁷ This allows Vietnam to act according to its interests and avoid being a pawn in geopolitical rivalries.

Second, Hanoi seeks to diversify its diplomatic and economic partnership. In addition to engaging with a broad array of partners such as China, the U.S., ASEAN, Russia, and the European Union, Vietnam benefits from a growing network of free trade agreements such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).⁸ Vietnam acts as if it is hedging its bets within the global system and not becoming overly reliant on one ally.

Third, Vietnam believes that balance and non-alignment are essential to how it operates between competing international power houses U.S. and China. Hanoi maintains good relations with China and the U.S. even as their rivalry intensifies. In 2023, for example, Vietnam hosted both Chinese President Xi Jinping and former U.S. President Joe Biden within three months of each other.⁹

Relations with China. Vietnam's bilateral trade with China reached \$205 billion in 2024, and Chinese firms supplied more than half of Vietnam's imported raw materials for key industries like textiles and electronics.¹⁰ These inputs are vital for Vietnam's export-led growth model, which relies on assembling and re-exporting finished goods to global markets, chiefly the U.S. and Europe.¹¹

Vietnam also serves as a manufacturing hub for Chinese firms seeking to bypass Western tariffs, particularly those imposed by the U.S.¹² This has made Vietnam not just a production base, but also a geopolitical pivot point.

What sets Vietnam apart in Southeast Asia is its unique party-to-party diplomatic structure with China. Vietnam's ruling CPV maintains long-standing institutional ties with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), with the two operating in parallel with state-to-state relations.¹³ These ties include regular high-level exchanges between party schools and ideological departments as well as personnel training programs. This structure enables a level of strategic coordination and ideological alignment that is not seen in China's relations with other ASEAN nations.

During President and CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping's visit to Vietnam in April 2025, the two nations signed 45 cooperation agreements, reinforcing their economic and strategic partnership. The agreements cover supply chains, artificial intelligence, joint maritime patrols, and railway development. The proposed \$8 billion railway is part of a broader push to integrate the two economies and reduce Vietnam's reliance on maritime shipping routes that are vulnerable to geopolitical disruption.¹⁴

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of Vietnamese–Chinese relations is the dispute in the South China Sea. Vietnam's China policy is likely to continue unless China pushes too far and turns Vietnamese opinion against it, as has happened in the Philippines. Despite Hanoi's obvious preference for stability and economic growth in its relations with China, overt Chinese hostility with respect to the Spratly Islands, for example, could sour Vietnamese public opinion on China to the point that the government has no choice but to push back. In February 2025, Beijing voiced opposition to Vietnamese construction on the Spratly Islands, reiterating its claim to the territory based on the Nine-Dash Line claim—which Americans and everyone else should explicitly reject—and saying that it opposes “construction activities on illegally-occupied islands and reefs.”¹⁵

China has long pursued islands claimed by Vietnam. In 1974, Chinese troops seized the Paracel Islands from South Vietnam in a conflict that left more than 100 South Vietnamese killed or wounded and several South Vietnamese warships sunk or heavily damaged.¹⁶ More recently, in 2014, a

state-owned Chinese oil company placed a deep-sea drilling rig in disputed waters and dispatched 80 ships (including seven military vessels) to support the rig. When Vietnam sent ships to disrupt the operation, China turned water cannons on the Vietnamese ships and rammed several of them, leaving Vietnamese sailors injured and damaging the vessels.¹⁷ The incident caused anti-Chinese riots in Vietnam.¹⁸

Vietnam seeks to continue its pragmatic approach to navigating its complex ties with China. Hanoi will prioritize economic development while carefully managing any geopolitical risks and defending its sovereignty in the South China Sea while not rocking the boat too much and upsetting the current situation that has led to stability and economic growth for Vietnam.

Relations with the United States. Vietnam has expanded its defense cooperation and diplomatic ties with Washington.¹⁹ Major commercial deals, most notably VietJet's purchase of more than 100 planes from Boeing earlier this year, have also encouraged both parties.²⁰

The U.S. remains Hanoi's largest export market, accounting for 30 percent of Vietnam's GDP. This is due mainly to the number of major operations for Apple, Intel, Nike, and Samsung, making it a crucial link in global supply chains.²¹

In July 2025, the Trump Administration concluded trade talks with Vietnam and announced a hugely successful deal in which the two countries reached a landmark agreement aimed at rebalancing trade.²² Under the deal, Vietnamese exports to the U.S. would be subject to a reduced 20 percent tariff, down from the initially proposed 46 percent, and Chinese goods transshipped through Vietnam would receive a 40 percent penalty, targeting "origin washing."²³ In exchange, Vietnam agreed to eliminate tariffs on U.S. exports, particularly favoring sectors like automobiles, semiconductors, and agricultural goods.²⁴ This move not only opens Vietnamese markets to American firms, but also aligns with Hanoi's broader goals of moving up the value chain and acquiring advanced technologies.²⁵

This newly minted trade agreement may also have ripple effects beyond Vietnam. Other Southeast Asian countries watching the outcome may look to renegotiate their own trade terms or adopt similar measures to avoid becoming unintended casualties of great-power competition. The agreement also underscores the U.S.'s broader Indo-Pacific strategy of forging ties with middle powers to counterbalance China's geopolitical reach.

In terms of security cooperation, war memory efforts, for example, are seen as important and positive from the Vietnamese side, and the United States should continue them. For years, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) within the U.S. Department of Defense has worked with the Vietnamese

government to identify the remains of U.S. servicemembers lost during the Vietnam War. In recent years, this cooperation has expanded significantly under the Vietnamese Wartime Accounting Initiative (VWAI) between the U.S. and Vietnamese governments.²⁶ Under the VWAI, the U.S. is helping the Vietnamese government to locate and identify Vietnamese personnel killed or missing from the war through archival research, capacity building, DNA analysis, and exchanges between veterans, academia, and policymakers.

The U.S. also has more traditional security cooperation with Vietnam, much of which began in the first Trump Administration. For example, from fiscal year (FY) 2016 to FY 2021, the United States authorized the permanent export of \$29.8 million in defense articles to Vietnam using Direct Commercial Sales (DCS). This included fire control/night vision, electronics, and firearms and related articles. From FY 2017 to FY 2023, Vietnam received \$104 million in foreign military financing (FMF), and in FY 2018, it received a separate \$81.5 million in FMF.²⁷ Vietnam's aging Russian equipment needs to be replaced, and Vietnam is looking to diversify its inventory; as a result, the U.S. and close U.S. allies like South Korea and Japan have an opportunity to increase their foreign military sales (FMS).

Two aircraft carriers visited Vietnam during the first Trump Administration: the USS *Carl Vinson* in 2018 and the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* in 2020.²⁸ These efforts are continuing in the second Trump Administration. In May 2025, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs John Noh traveled to Hanoi for a defense policy dialogue that led to the announcement of continued and expanded efforts in defense industrial collaboration, joint training, U.N. peacekeeping operations, military consultations, war memory efforts, and multilateral consultations, especially within the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+).²⁹

The American Perspective

From the American perspective, Vietnam's non-alignment and commitment to defending its sovereignty are advantages rather than disadvantages. Vietnam would probably never align itself with the U.S. explicitly against China, and pushing for it to do so would be counterproductive. Instead, American policymakers should meet Hanoi where it is, extending a hand of friendship and cooperation and collaborating with Vietnam on regional issues to the extent that Vietnam is willing to do so and when such collaboration is in the interests of both countries.

American conservatives have embraced the concept of a free and open Indo-Pacific in part because this concept does not represent an attempt to force potential partners like Vietnam to choose sides. At the same time, it presupposes opposition to Chinese meddling in the affairs of its neighbors and supports the efforts of countries like Vietnam to defend their sovereign interests against Chinese encroachment.

The Chinese pressure campaign against the Philippines is of particular concern to the United States, and Vietnam could play a very positive role by endorsing Philippine sovereignty over disputed features in the South China Sea, or at least by continuing to push for adherence to international maritime law and for China to avoid using force in attempting to settle disputes. These efforts are especially helpful within international forums like ASEAN.

Recommendations

The United States should continue to pursue economic, diplomatic, and security engagement with Vietnam. To this end, Washington should:

1. **Expand economic engagement with Vietnam.** From Vietnam's perspective, economic engagement is paramount because Hanoi's most important goal is economic development. Deals on trade, including on critical minerals that are available in Vietnam, should be pursued.
2. **Promote Vietnamese cooperation with the Philippines.** From the U.S. perspective, increased Vietnamese cooperation with other states interested in a free and open Indo-Pacific is a good thing. Increased cooperation on all fronts between Vietnam and the Philippines is especially welcome in view of the shared security challenges the two countries face in the South China Sea.
3. **Continue the Vietnam Wartime Accounting Initiative.** This initiative has been building trust and cooperation between the two sides both at the governmental and societal levels and deserves to be continued.
4. **Expand security cooperation.** The security cooperation between the U.S. and Vietnam begun during the first Trump Administration should continue and be expanded in the second Trump Administration. Such avenues as FMS/FMF, joint training, port visits, and official consultations are all positive and should be pursued.

Conclusion

Washington should view bamboo diplomacy as a positive signal from Vietnam. The U.S. should continue to look for mutually beneficial ways to deepen ties such as trade, technological exchanges, and regional security. This approach will encourage Vietnam's continued willingness to work with the U.S. and build Vietnam's capacity to defend its sovereign interests in an increasingly contested region. From the American perspective, a prosperous and strong Vietnam that is capable of defending its sovereign interests in the region is advantageous even if Vietnam does not explicitly choose sides. Vietnam should also continue to use its influence in ASEAN to enforce regional norms and bring China to the table both on those norms and on the law of the sea.

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