

## U.S.-Vietnam Defense Relations: Deepening Ties, Adding Relevance

by Lewis M. Stern

### Key Points

Normal defense relations between the United States and Vietnam emerged from discussions conducted from mid-1995 to late 1996. The first years of interaction between the American and Vietnamese defense establishments revolved around learning about one another, developing a common language, becoming accustomed to the differences in how the respective ministries managed policy and exercised authority, and learning to work with the personalities on both sides who were the mainstay of the relationship. At the outset, the Vietnamese were suspicious, conservative, and not inclined to move beyond argument about the "legacy issues," such as the effects of Agent Orange and alleged U.S. Government support to antiregime organizations.

In 2000–2004, the United States made the first efforts to modestly expand the scope and pace of defense engagement. Vietnamese military reluctance to ratchet up activities that smacked of close defense cooperation did not altogether preclude defense ministry officials from recognizing the dividends that could derive from the relationship with the U.S. military, and organizing for at least gradual shifts in views that enabled new types of engagement in the early 2000s. During his March 2000 visit to Hanoi, Defense Secretary William Cohen and Defense Minister Pham Van Tra agreed that ship visits would be a positive aspect of a gradually expanding plan for military engagement. Fol-

lowing that visit, on the instructions of the minister, the Vietnamese defense ministry entered into a long series of technical discussions with U.S. Pacific Fleet representatives that, in late 2003, enabled the first U.S. Navy ship port call in Vietnam. President Bill Clinton's November 2003 visit to Vietnam sustained that momentum, focused on the successes of demining cooperation, and legitimized high-level discussions aimed at managing wartime legacy issues in a more effective fashion.

The bilateral defense relationship with Vietnam developed in three phases. The first phase, from initial contacts during which the notion of defense normalization was broached in 1995–1996 to the preparations for the March 2000 visit of then–Secretary of Defense William Cohen, was characterized by Vietnamese caution regarding U.S. intentions, and matching reservations in Washington plus a concern regarding the importance of preserving the prisoner of war/missing in action (POW/MIA) priority focus.

In the second phase, from 2000 to 2004, the United States took the first efforts to modestly expand the scope and pace of defense engagement. The Vietnamese clarified the more rigid aspects of their position on enhanced defense relations, dug in their heels, and resisted anything beyond the most symbolic forward movement in defense relations.

In the third phase, from 2005 to 2007, the United States began to look for ways to broaden defense interaction with Vietnam,

believing that new activities could be easily integrated into the existing plan, and that shared concerns for the well being of Southeast Asia and a common approach to broad transnational issues in the region suggested a natural basis for strategic community between Hanoi and Vietnam. The Vietnamese defense establishment began to explore steps that could enhance the relationship, take military-to-military engagement to the next level, and infuse some real strategic content into the defense relationship.

### First Overtures

Discussions conducted between mid-1995 and late 1996 produced a foundation for normal defense relations between the United States and Vietnam. Formal military-to-military relations were initiated in November 1996, a year after government-to-government normalization, though Hanoi had taken some earlier steps toward rapprochement including the accreditation of a U.S. Defense Attaché in December 1995. The first real steps toward military-to-military relations were halting, modest, and cautious, revolving around mutually agreed initiatives that were constrained in scope and deliberately low key in nature.<sup>1</sup>

In the first phase, Vietnam's defense ministry was reluctant to be drawn into activities that regional observers could interpret as a firm and warm embrace of the fledgling defense relationship, and the U.S.

Government focused tightly on economic, trade, consular, and diplomatic normalization. The Vietnamese defense ministry was perfectly content to keep the pace constrained and scope modest, and the Department of Defense (DOD) was prepared to stick with an exploratory approach that fixed on benign, uncontroversial areas of focus as the starting point for bilateral military engagement.

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becoming accustomed to the differences in how the respective ministries managed policy and exercised authority, and learning to work with the personalities on both sides who were the mainstay of the relationship. The startup U.S.-Vietnamese defense relationship in 1997 consisted of three types of activities: U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM)-hosted, Title 10-funded multilateral conferences and seminars; senior-level military visits; and practical bilateral cooperation in areas such as search and rescue, military medicine, environmental security, and demining.

The parameters of this relationship were defined early. In 1996–1997, the United States offered the Vietnamese defense ministry a range of starting points for a program of military engagement and adduced a series of simple precepts for defense relations: POW/MIA remained the national priority; all activities had to be transparent and

not aimed at impacting the equities of other bilateral defense relations; the relationship was to unfold in a carefully calibrated manner intended as slow and deliberate; and the relationship was to be a “two-way street.” The Vietnamese reacted in early 1997 with a parallel set of starting points that emphasized sovereignty, independence, national dignity, and the importance of a cautious, modest pace for the process of normalization. The decision during the tenure of the 9th Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam to retain an extremely modest focus on military medicine, military scientific and technological cooperation, and disaster relief/humanitarian projects guided the relationship from the earliest joint activities in 1997 through at least 2000–2001.<sup>2</sup>

Officers from the defense ministry’s External Relations Department (ERD) were suspicious, conservative, and not inclined to move beyond argument about the “legacy issues,” such as the effects of Agent Orange and alleged U.S. Government support to anti-regime organizations. Senior defense ministry officials found it difficult to understand U.S. intentions and presumed that military-to-military relations were just one more means by which Washington could manipulate the POW/MIA issue. While the United States referred to “defense relations,” the Vietnamese spoke of “military-to-military contacts,” implying a relationship that was orders of magnitude more confined and modest than a defense relationship. Eventually, as the relationship became routine and sought a consistent level of communication, the phrase *military-to-military* became much less of a means of drawing a distinction between the DOD term of art and the preferred ERD nomenclature.

In this period, both sides fixed their attention on fulfilling a light schedule of low-profile annual plans that began with the first postnormalization visit of the U.S. commander of Pacific Forces to Hanoi, an initial orientation visit to the United States by a group of ERD senior colonels, the opening of the Vietnamese defense attaché office in the

Vietnamese embassy in Washington, and visits to Vietnam by U.S. military officers from the National War College and Air War College for area familiarization. The primary channel of communication evolved between working level representatives of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (ISA) and the ERD. These activities became frequent set piece actions between directorate level officials representing organizations with singularly different mandates and vastly different levels of policy authority that were ultimately responsible for shaping an annual plan of activities in the bilateral defense relationship.

While the ERD was the defense ministry’s eyes and ears on U.S.-Vietnamese relations, senior officers manning key positions had decidedly less maneuvering room at the negotiating table. They were less inclined to make judgments about the acceptability of recommended activities than were ISA representatives. They were more directly responsible to the defense ministry and more inclined to defer decisions until explicit instructions arrived from that quarter, whereas ISA functioned on the basis of broad instructions and had more of an ability to innovate at negotiating sessions without requesting additional guidance from the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). In fact, following the first few steps in the original November 1996 plan, including the visit to Hanoi by the commander of USPACOM and the visit to the United States by the defense ministry’s senior colonels’ delegation, in April 1997 the Vietnamese ERD unceremoniously postponed the remainder of planned activity for the year, including the visits by the U.S. National Defense University (NDU) and Air War College study groups. The reason given for the postponement was the upcoming National Assembly elections, which would require senior leaders to set aside other activities so as to ensure successful election to the legislature of a predetermined number of People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) candidates.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, a number of achievements in the relationship were chalked up from 1996 to 1999, including the visit of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Affairs in November 1996 that kicked

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off the defense relationship, the February 1997 trip to Hanoi by the commander of USPACOM, and the arrival of Vietnam's first defense attaché in March 1997.

In late 1997, the legacy issues of Agent Orange and Vietnam's MIAs became central in all ISA and ERD dialogue on military relations. In October 1998, Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam visited the Pentagon, followed by Deputy Defense Minister Tran Hanh's trip to the United States in the same month. ISA-ERD planning meetings in 1999, a successful Air War College study group visit to Vietnam (including the first flight line visit to Nha Trang Pilot's School), and an April 1999 visit by U.S. military engineers that initiated the important demining training program for Vietnam were followed by lengthy discussions that culminated in the March 2000 visit to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City by Secretary Cohen.

## Circumspect Courtship

In 2000–2004, the United States took the first efforts to modestly expand the scope and pace of defense engagement. The Vietnamese

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clarified the more rigid aspects of their position on enhanced defense relations, dug in their heels, and resisted anything beyond the most symbolic forward movement in defense relations. For example, through the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Vietnamese claimed a longstanding aversion to anything involving U.S. special forces, but managed to overcome that reluctance when they became convinced of the attractiveness of demining-focused

activities and events involving U.S. Special Operations Command Pacific.

During this “courtship” period, the Vietnamese continuously asserted their clear objections to anything that smacked of explicitly military education. DOD could often press beyond standard objections and concerns by describing and defining proposed initiatives without using “red-lined” words. However, a potentially insurmountable hurdle involved the “vetting” of Vietnamese participants nominated for an activity as free of any prior involvement in acts against human rights. The U.S. side described the legislatively mandated vetting requirement as the most effective means of identifying professional military officers who would profit from participation in proposed events. Often, that satisfied Vietnamese concerns and gave the defense ministry enough of a comfort level to authorize PAVN participation in USPACOM-hosted, Title 10–funded seminars, multilateral conferences, and other educational opportunities.

Throughout the tenure of three defense ministers, the Vietnamese military made clear that Hanoi would never put troops in the field with uniformed U.S. forces for the purposes of joint activities or training on Vietnamese soil. Over time, training possibilities took on new and unique shapes, including multilateral options and training in peacekeeping methods, and the U.S. Government explored those possibilities with the Vietnamese. Still, the Vietnamese were slow to show any inclination to get past their own rhetoric. The generation of Soviet- and Chinese-trained troops and engineers might have to pass from the scene or become so overwhelmingly helpless in the face of new technologies before the Vietnamese would become more receptive to working with the U.S. military.

However, pronounced Vietnamese military reluctance to ratchet up activities that smacked of close defense cooperation did not altogether preclude the possibility of defense ministry officials recognizing the dividends that could derive from the relationship with the U.S. military, and organizing for at least gradual shifts in views that enabled new types of engagement in the early 2000s. For exam-

ple, during 3 years' worth of working level discussions, the U.S. side made clear the DOD view regarding the utility and positive contribution ship visits could make to global naval diplomacy. The Vietnamese stuck to their stated disinterest in port calls, noting that this decision would have to come from the top and could not be driven by inspired discussions at planning sessions. During his March 2000 visit to Hanoi, Secretary Cohen and Defense Minister Pham Van Tra agreed that ship visits would be a positive aspect of a gradually expanding plan for military engagement. Following that visit, on the instructions of the minister, the Vietnamese defense ministry entered into a long series of technical discussions with U.S. Pacific Fleet representatives that, in late 2003, enabled the first U.S. Navy ship port call in Vietnam. President Bill Clinton's November 2003 visit to Vietnam sustained that momentum, focused on the successes of demining cooperation, and legitimized high-level discussions aimed at managing wartime legacy issues in a more effective fashion.

## Nudging Things Forward

In 2002–2003, OSD Policy began to look for new ways to realize the great potential of this bilateral defense relationship, reasoning that new activities could be easily integrated into the existing plan, and that shared concerns for the well-being of Southeast Asia and a common approach to broad transnational issues in the region suggested a natural basis for strategic communication between Hanoi and Washington. Senior DOD leaders cited the clear similarities in strategic viewpoints between Hanoi and Washington as the basis for their argument that the United States should be able to build on existing relationships, recent positive precedent-setting meetings, and a generally positive predisposition in favor of the bilateral defense relationship. The trajectory of the relationship was sustained by:

- continued bilateral cooperation on matters such as demining, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance, and environmental security

- slow but steady expansion of the areas in which the two militaries conducted practical bilateral cooperation

- an enhanced level of visits and formal discussions including successes in the USPACOM–defense ministry planning talks (the Bilateral Defense Dialogues) and policy-level discussions that led to the first Political-Military Dialogue in October 2008.

Defense Minister Tra’s November 2003 visit to the United States and the first U.S. Navy ship visit in the same month jump-started a series of successes that fueled progress in developing normal military relations through 2008–2009. The relationship took on positive momentum beginning with the meeting between Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Prime Minister Phan Van Khai in mid-2005, to Secretary Rumsfeld’s visit to Hanoi in mid-2006, to the unprecedented visit to the Pentagon by Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung in June 2008. During 2005–2008, the U.S.-Vietnamese relationship grew steadily, expanding in scope in measured but noticeable ways:

- In 2005, Hanoi signed the end-user agreement that was the prerequisite for starting International Military Education Training (IMET) and foreign military sales.

- In 2006, International Traffic in Arms Regulations restrictions were modified to enable some constrained arms sales.

- Five years after laying out the plan for port calls by U.S. Navy vessels, the Vietnamese side yielded slightly on the “one ship per year” rule, allowing a hydrographic vessel and later a humanitarian ship to enter Vietnamese waters in 2007–2008, even though a gray hull had already taken the single allotted slot.

- The number of high-level visits, also the subject of early Vietnamese efforts to control the pace and scope of relations by restricting the number of senior DOD visitors, became a matter of what the traffic would bear.

- Practical bilateral cooperation in search and rescue, environmental security, and demining remained consistently high-quality engagements involving well-thought-out interactions at the specialist level. The

Vietnamese began considering expanding the levels of activity to include meteorological and hydrographic studies, and capacity-building in humanitarian disaster relief.

In 2005–2007, the defense ministry began to more seriously explore strategic objectives in the relationship, such as formal interaction focused on building disaster response capabilities for the People’s Army, and a more effective means of working together on search and rescue operations and exercises. In that time frame, the Vietnamese, though still guarded in their statements, were inclined to support informal discussions about steps that could enhance the relationship, take military-to-military engagement to the next level, and infuse some real strategic content into the defense relationship. The Vietnamese entertained possibilities of peacekeeping training, simple joint naval exercises (such as a passing exercise), an acquisition and cross-servicing agreement, a strategic dialogue between the defense ministry and OSD, hydrographic cooperation and joint

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studies of the strategic impact of meteorological shifts and sea level changes, and continuing routine operational level interaction with USPACOM planners in the form of the Bilateral Defense Dialogue aimed at planning the annual calendar for the relationship.

Though these were significant and noticeable breakthroughs in the relationship, the Vietnamese defense ministry did not commit to these steps until it

had sufficient assurances that the pace and scope of developing defense relations with Washington would not throw its equities in regional relations out of balance. The ministry worked hard to make sure its commitment to enhanced military engagement with the United States was not perceived as a tilt in overall foreign policy objectives toward a one-sided reliance on a single friendship.

The Vietnamese defense ministry did not signal its readiness to sign the end-user agreement, subscribe to rules governing IMET (including mandatory human rights vetting), or proceed with an annual schedule of ship visits on the basis of a strategic calculation that closer defense and security cooperation was the answer to its security concerns. Indeed, the ministry did not agree to an accelerated schedule of DOD leadership visits or entertain the possibility of expert level consultations on possible future topics for bilateral cooperation until there were assurances that these decisions would not have a strategic impact on the relationships the Vietnamese remained most concerned about: bilateral links with China, multilateral links with Southeast Asian neighbors, and organized interaction with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

That is, senior defense ministry officials decided to press forward on initiatives meant to enhance bilateral defense relations between Hanoi and Washington during 2005 and 2006 once it became clear there would be no fundamentally costly strategic consequences for proceeding. The ministry had long required some quiet signal that there would be no consequential blowback from China on anything in the U.S.-Vietnam defense relationship.

## **Building Relations**

During 2008–2009, the bilateral defense relationship started to focus on building capabilities and developing new skill sets in specialized areas: peacekeeping, environmental security, multilateral search and rescue coordination, and regional disaster response. The Vietnamese defense and foreign ministries mastered the nuances and details of the programs and understood the funding realities and recoiled less in the face of a newly proposed U.S. initiative. The Vietnamese were

prepared to discuss issues surrounding the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI)—including their concerns with seizure actions and the views of the United Nations (UN), as well as the compatibility of PSI with existing national law—in ways that suggested recognition of new possibilities in bilateral defense

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cooperation and more confidence in their regional and global role and the requirements necessary to fulfill those responsibilities.

There was an increasingly important multilateral dimension to U.S.-Vietnam interaction, and a heightened interest in cooperating with the United States to meet transnational challenges. Vietnam staked out a role for itself in the region and on the global stage, and it intended to make the most of its term as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. Senior Vietnamese representatives reinforced this intent by focusing on the multiplier effect that bilateral defense and security cooperation with the United States had on Vietnam's ability to play meaningful leadership roles in the region and by taking foreign policy positions that stressed the need for Washington to do better at managing its relations with ASEAN. Vietnam applauded the Obama administration's movement in the direction of acceding to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation as an important step, and argued that the U.S. Government could make a real difference by committing to a U.S.-ASEAN summit before the end of 2009. Hanoi also made the case that the United States should take a higher profile position on South China Sea issues, perhaps moving out in front of an ASEAN consensus (if one could ever be developed) by cautioning China of the potential political consequences of continuing its trajectory on this issue in the face of a united ASEAN.

Bilateral issues still abounded. Vietnam remained chagrined in 2008–2009 that Congress kept passing punitive legislation that spoke to Vietnam's human rights record, and that the administration had not been actively speaking against these legislative initiatives. Agent Orange was, in effect, Vietnam's POW/MIA issue, one that galvanized broad popular sentiment, generated activism within specific constituencies, and promised to remain a domestic issue with significant foreign policy consequences. However, such issues no longer were show-stoppers. They were integrated into a bilateral dialogue that tested possibilities, explored new avenues of cooperation, reviewed existing programs, and allowed venting on sensitive issues.

During 2006–2008, the defense ministry made a real effort to bring to the table several levels of representation beyond its External Relations Department, including the Institute for Military Strategy, a relatively new organization subordinate to the Office of the Minister of Defense. The level of ministry participation in bilateral meetings and events showed a broadening interest in the relationship and also demonstrated the increasing depth of expertise in Vietnam about the United States. The ministry was positive about the idea of a military-to-military policy-level dialogue, something that was discussed briefly at the meeting between Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Prime Minister Dung in June 2008, and had earlier been an agenda item in exploratory private discussions with senior and midlevel defense ministry officials. This suggested an interest in pushing the relationship toward bilateral discussions on regional defense issues, strategic thinking, plans and intentions regarding defense relations in the region, and defense modernization and requirements.

In the same time frame, the Vietnamese foreign ministry resumed a more active role in defense and security relations, returning to a level of involvement it had during the first working level discussions of the modalities of military-to-military normalization from 1994 to 1995. In June 2008, during the prime minister's visit to Washington, which featured a meeting with President George W. Bush and a separate visit to the Pentagon for talks with

the Secretary of Defense, the Vietnamese agreed to a Political-Military Dialogue led by the State Department and foreign ministry, which took place in early October 2008. Vietnamese embassy efforts in Washington to invigorate lines of communication with DOD and its think tanks continued this trend. In 2008 and 2009, embassy officials encouraged informal discussions between visiting Vietnamese strategic thinkers and NDU, and entertained the possibility of sending Vietnamese officials to the university as participants in the International Fellows program. Foreign ministry officials and embassy senior staff embraced in principle a proposal to expand and upgrade the annual delegations of U.S. National War College students to include representatives of NDU, and conduct a dialogue with the defense ministry's National Defense Academy and the foreign ministry's Diplomatic Academy. The Vietnamese ambassador in Washington took the initiative following his 2007 arrival to revive the practice of a quarterly meeting with the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia, expanding that format to include both the Defense Attaché and a representative of the Political Section.

In 2008, DOD leadership focused again on how the United States could be doing more and how the department should shape efforts to heighten the tempo and spectrum of cooperation. Senior OSD Policy officials felt the need for a new organizing concept that went beyond the idea that the relationship should proceed cautiously and incrementally for the foreseeable future. The idea of regional sensitivities to increasing proximity between Hanoi and Washington struck many as an old notion that did not recognize the extent to which the region itself considered the enhanced relationship as a development that resonated positively with regional goals.

The defense ministry, perhaps at the urging of the office of the prime minister and the foreign ministry, had moved forward slightly beginning in 2005 by agreeing to look at capacity-building in narrow areas such as disaster response, humanitarian crisis coordination, and military medicine. Certainly, Hanoi did not plunge into these areas of cooperation by embracing initiatives, subscribing to assistance programs, or agreeing to launch

tailored initiatives. However, in 2007 and 2008, the Vietnamese defense establishment was more open to the argument that the initial constraining parameters that helped define the modest pace and scope of early defense relations could be modified. There was still no Vietnamese military support for discarding restraint and plunging into active cooperation on a strategic level, looking at possible joint training and exercising opportunities, or ratcheting up cooperation in areas such as resource management reform, military professionalization, or doctrinal modernization.

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Both sides had by 2009 experienced slightly more than 12 formal years of military-to-military engagement. The United States had placed a succession of four Defense Attachés in Hanoi since December 1995. Vietnam had assigned four similarly talented senior colonels to Washington since March 1997. Vietnamese officers involved during the earliest days of the defense relationship had been promoted in rank and elevated in assignments. A former Vietnamese defense attaché in Washington had become the deputy director of the Military Strategy Institute in 2006. Junior PAVN officers who served as staff functionaries supporting ERD negotiations with ISA from 1997 to 2001 had been elevated to key jobs in the leadership suite of the ERD. Similarly, former U.S. Defense Attachés had returned to Washington and taken teaching positions in critical professional military education institutions and assumed leadership roles with the Joint Staff and with the Defense Language Institute. The Vietnamese defense ministry leadership responsible for the startup discussions regarding military relations in 1996 had retired, a pattern replicated among U.S. counterparts responsible for policy issues in the earliest

years of the defense relationship, suggesting that the policy of improving defense relations was now generational.

There were new institutional actors on both sides, including Vietnam's Military Strategy Institute, and the subordinate Institute for Foreign Defense Relations, as well as the new Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs on the U.S. side of the equation, established in late 2007 to replace the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs.

Both sides had become more knowledgeable about one another, better equipped to react to opportunities and determine the most effective use of resources to improve practical interaction, and more inclined to frank and straightforward dialogue. This was a relationship that was growing, flourishing, and showing promise beyond the expectations that greeted the idea of military-to-military normalization in 1995–1996. However, a range of hard problems revolving around attitudes and issues that are artifacts of the war, Vietnam's commitment to the principles of nonalignment, a hypersensitivity to matters of sovereignty, hesitancy about embracing certain aspects of practical bilateral defense cooperation such as training and exercises, and Hanoi's concerns regarding the consequences of increasing proximity to Washington suggest that this relationship will continue to progress in measured ways.

### **Where to Go from Here?**

How will the United States move the relationship from where it is today? How can we press beyond the current parameters? And how can we best nudge the Vietnamese toward a much more direct military cooperation?

Three variables need to be factored into planning next steps in the defense relationship with Vietnam:

- High-level buy-in to a concept of enhanced defense relationships does not translate readily into anything more than a commitment to make a commitment. Though the prime minister endorsed the idea of more profound dialogue, heightened interaction, and accelerated practical bilateral

cooperation, the act of translating that idea into an instruction can be agonizingly long and incredibly frustrating.

- All appreciable advances in the relationship have been cultured first in an “informational exchange” period, where the United States and Vietnam have agreed to a formal interim step involving a substantive exchange of data as a means of building confidence, raising levels of knowledge, and buying time for determining intentions, exploring ulterior motives, and maneuvering to achieve perceived advantages en route to a final commitment to a program, an event, or a process.

- The existing mechanisms for managing the defense relationship will govern the possibilities for the near term, and those mechanisms will seek to relate proposals to existing forms of interaction, familiar events and activities, and already functioning routines and practices.

This means the Vietnamese will regard with suspicion proposals for events that do not conform to expectations. The defense ministry will look at new initiatives as exceeding existing agreements. The office of the prime minister will be more than happy to allow the defense ministry to manage the relationship, confident that it will not get ahead of the consensus regarding what is politically possible in defense relations.

It is therefore best to think in terms of small and incremental advances, rely on already existing forms and routines, defer to existing channels of communication, and exercise patience.

The Vietnamese defense ministry may seem as though it is ready for something new, but it will not so readily embrace significant departures from existing forms and commitments. The prime minister clothed his points to Secretary Gates during the June 2008 meeting in the most conservative vocabulary possible, and the defense ministry is likely to react to the position that defense relations can and should be expanded in slow, measured, and exceedingly cautious ways. This is a system that does not quickly embrace change, even when it senses opportunities and commits to altered trajectories and new policy goals. The way to work within these confines: start by identifying familiar forms

of interaction as the means of introducing new ideas; utilize existing mechanisms of communication as the way to socialize new initiatives; and identify the least dramatic way of accomplishing a new activity. Some basic guidelines for conducting the U.S.-Vietnam defense relationship include:

- frame advances in the vocabulary of the existing relationship
- utilize informational exchanges as the means to introduce new ideas
- stick to formulas that enshrine the reciprocal dimension to the relationship
- treat Vietnam as a strategic equal
- deliver the humanitarian assistance necessary to grease the cogs
- confront the domestic legal and political realities of the Agent Orange issue
- minimize rhetoric that proclaims every success as a net loss for China
- synchronize new bilateral developments with ASEAN-approved activities
- recognize Vietnam's concern with being left behind as the region thrives
- build slowly and carefully on existing bilateral activities
- give Vietnam the level of attention it craves
- build on Vietnam's regional interests and global concerns.

In program-focused terms, the United States should press the Vietnamese toward using IMET for much more strictly mainstream military education opportunities. The U.S. Government should move employment of IMET resources from the agreed upon areas of use—military medicine, military scientific and technological cooperation, and humanitarian cooperation—to areas of real military training, perhaps beginning with some modest Mobile Training Teams focused on airport safety, armored personnel carrier (APC) maintenance, and other areas that have been at the core of “theoretical” discussions with the Vietnamese of what might be possible in the future. Enrolling Vietnamese military officers in more expanded IMET courses focused on professionalism and civil-military relations would be an important means of developing a comfort level with the notion of selling hardware and systems to Vietnam.

The United States should continue to urge the Vietnamese to sign on to the Proliferation Security Initiative, whose principals represent common ground. Hanoi continues to fret about the international law involved, level of commitment required, and consequences for its nonaligned status. Between the desire within DOD to define an inventive means of bringing the uncommitted and undecided along and Vietnam's own continuing inquisitiveness about this program, Washington should be able to find a way to move things along in a manner that satisfies Vietnam's concerns and serves U.S. interest by getting Hanoi married to regional counterproliferation activities.

The United States should see Vietnam's decision to sign a letter of request (LOR) for price and availability information regarding long-discussed helicopter parts as a positive step, even if that process has stalled as Vietnam's military takes another look at the

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requirement. Vietnam's agreement to take the first step in that process with an eye to acquiring spare parts and possible repairs or restorations for the UH-1s that remain in country, followed by a similar LOR involving APC parts, opens up a new set of opportunities for advancing practical military relations. The foreign military sales process is lengthy and legally complex, but in the end it is a positive step toward cooperation on ways that can benefit the PAVN, develop existing capabilities, enhance professionalism, and help identify common ground on which the United States and Vietnam can cooperate.

The United States should urge Vietnam to agree to more than one U.S. Navy gray hull

ship visit a year and should consider a decision to diversify these activities. DOD encourages refueling stops and passing exercise-type activities that would enhance Vietnam's maritime safety procedures, and in early 2009, DOD accomplished a flyout to the USS *Stennis*, overcoming an early and overwhelming reluctance on the part of Vietnamese defense policy leaders to engage with the United States in a fashion that would put Vietnamese in proximity with American warmaking capabilities, advanced technology, aircraft carriers, and other significant modern platforms. These are activities that should be encouraged because they would nudge Vietnam toward opportunities to derive training value from activities with the U.S. military.

Vietnam should sign an acquisition cross-servicing agreement, a bilateral agreement that facilitates the exchange of logistics support, supplies, and services during ship visits, exercises, training, or emergency situations. Hanoi's concern with this agreement is that it could involve providing services for U.S. military assets deploying in ways that are not supported by the Vietnamese government. The United States should focus on the bilateral advantages of being able to pay in kind in a fashion that facilitates ship visits to Vietnam, or enabling the use of local resources in the context of bilateral training and exercise events, as a means of selling the practical, operational advantages of an acquisition cross-servicing arrangement.

The United States has worked with Vietnam to engender an interest in enhancing its peacekeeping and search and rescue capabilities, so that Vietnam is prepared to utilize existing U.S. programs to develop those niche abilities. Hanoi's willingness to assume increased obligations in the region and on the global stage as a leader and catalyst for transnational cooperation has made it slightly more comfortable with the notion of engaging in multilateral activities, informational exchanges, and regional educational opportunities in which the United States is involved, and even bankrolling such exercises. Vietnam has committed to participate in the U.S. Government's Global Peacekeeping Operations Initiative, though the highest levels continue to add caveats suggesting some residual reluctance to embrace this opportunity entirely.

The United States needs to identify the additional effort necessary to achieve unconditional Vietnamese comfort with the initiative in a way that will make cooperation on other regional challenges—maritime security, for example—that much easier to broach when the time comes.

The key to moving ahead on defense cooperation, the critical step necessary to take the relationship to the next level, is a willingness to press beyond existing parameters and policies and to chip away at longstanding ceilings and limits on activities. There are several mutually accepted limits that have been a part of the relationship since 1997, including the ceiling on the number of high-level visits per year, annual ship visits, and monthly activities in the defense relationship. The United States understands that there are operational limits to Vietnam's ability to take advantage of opportunities. However, these ought not to be limiting factors, especially when opportunities that can contribute in a positive way to improving cooperation and understanding are at stake. These limits no longer serve the relationship. The result is the inability to take advantage of even the most tantalizing and logical of chances for enhanced bilateral cooperation on security and defense issues of mutual interest.

It is important to help the Vietnamese get accustomed to the notion that as the bilateral defense relationship begins to focus on building capabilities and developing new skill sets in specialized areas—peacekeeping, environmental security, search and rescue, and regional disaster response—our two defense establishments eventually will have to turn attention to defense reform, professional military education, standards of conduct, and civil-military relations. These issues will have to become as much of a part of the bilateral dialogue as the more management-focused efforts to keep the calendar of events in the defense relationship organized and compelling, not only because of the legislative requirements, end-user obligations that are explicitly a part of IMET and foreign military financing, but also because of the trajectory the bilateral dialogue should take. The U.S.-Vietnam relationship will benefit by developing from practical cooperation on programs to a much more strategic

approach to developing defense establishment resources and capabilities. The DOD dialogue with the Philippines involves a mutual investment in Philippines Defense Reform. The U.S. defense relationship with Indonesia has taken on a similar dimension. And the U.S. defense relationship with Thailand also involves a commitment to defense resource management reforms. This might be down the road for Vietnam, but the United States needs to acknowledge that a real partnership will also end up having the two sides speaking to one another about growing the military relationship in a way that focuses on these responsibilities.

The idea of a “policy dialogue” between the Department of Defense and the ministry of defense, mentioned during Prime Minister Dung's mid-2008 meetings with Secretary Gates, will bring real dividends for both sides by elevating the dialogue from program management and issues of practical cooperation to enduring defense and security issues regional and global in scope, to envisioning the strategic future of U.S.-Vietnam defense and security cooperation, and to wide-ranging discussions of future trends and challenges in a transforming world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A long history of humanitarian activities in Vietnam predated normalization. Since the late 1980s, civic action work by U.S. Pacific Command focused on schoolhouse construction, medical civil action programs, and flood relief, associated in the period from 1988 through 1994 with prisoner of war/missing in action (POW/MIA) activities. When Office of the Secretary of Defense Policy developed the entry level program that led to normalization of military relations in November 1996, the Pentagon sought to utilize the kind of confidence-building activities that had paved the way for increased access in the context of the POW/MIA program during 1987–1990.

<sup>2</sup> During Assistant Secretary of Defense Peter Rodman's visit to Hanoi in summer 2005, Defense Minister Pham Van Tra articulated this trilogy of interests, clearly indicating that this approach continued to define the maximum feasible parameters for bilateral defense cooperation.

<sup>3</sup> See Edmund Malesky and Paul Schuler, “Paint-by-Numbers Democracy: The Stakes, Structure, and Results of the 2007 Vietnamese National Assembly Election,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4, no. 1, 1–48. At the time, the External Relations Department's explanation of its abrupt departure from the agreed-upon plan of action was regarded as a cover for enduring defense ministry tentativeness about the proposed work toward defense relations with the United States.

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