

The Vietnam-United States Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in the Indo-Pacific Region

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ABSTRACT

The current bilateral relationship between Vietnam and the United States has reached the status of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. The evolving cooperation between these two nations is crucial in maintaining stability and promoting growth in the Indo-Pacific region. This study analyzes the dynamics of their cooperation, particularly in economics, politics, and regional security. The study uses the concept of regionalism to analyze the interactions and cooperation in the region, considering the influence of the principles of regionalism on the formation and implementation of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. The research methodology is qualitative, using a descriptive-analytical approach. The research identifies and analyses how the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Vietnam and the United States affects the Indo-Pacific region's economic, political, and security dynamics. The findings of this research indicate that the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Vietnam and the United States plays a crucial role in shaping the Indo-Pacific region's economic, political, and security dynamics. The findings are expected to significantly contribute to the theoretical and practical understanding of the Vietnam-United States regional cooperation and its impact on the region's geopolitical dynamics.

Keywords: *Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, Indo-Pacific Region, Regional Security*

Hubungan bilateral Vietnam dan Amerika Serikat saat ini telah mencapai status Kemitraan Strategis Komprehensif. Kerja sama yang terus berkembang di antara kedua negara ini memegang peran penting dalam menjaga stabilitas dan mendorong pertumbuhan di kawasan Indo-Pasifik. Fokus utama penelitian ini adalah menganalisis dinamika hubungan kerja sama keduanya, khususnya dalam aspek diplomasi, ekonomi, dan keamanan regional. Penelitian ini menggunakan konsep regionalisme untuk menganalisis interaksi dan kerjasama di kawasan, dengan mempertimbangkan pengaruh prinsip-prinsip regionalisme terhadap pembentukan dan pelaksanaan Kemitraan Strategis Komprehensif. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan analisis deskriptif. Penelitian ini mengidentifikasi dan menganalisis bagaimana kemitraan strategis komprehensif antara Vietnam dan Amerika Serikat memengaruhi dinamika ekonomi, politik, dan keamanan di Kawasan Indo-Pasifik. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa kemitraan strategis komprehensif antara Vietnam dan Amerika Serikat memainkan peran yang sangat penting dalam membentuk dinamika ekonomi, politik, dan keamanan di Kawasan Indo-Pasifik. Hasil penelitian ini diharapkan dapat memberikan kontribusi signifikan terhadap pemahaman teoritis dan praktis tentang kerjasama regional Vietnam-Amerika Serikat dan implikasinya dalam dinamika geopolitik kawasan tersebut.

Kata kunci: *Kemitraan Strategis Komprehensif, Kawasan Indo-Pasifik, Keamanan Regional*

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Introduction

Vietnam has had a long history of bilateral relations with the United States, beginning in 1995 after two decades of strained relations. Despite the challenges of the past, both countries continue to strive to strengthen their partnership through mutually beneficial cooperation in various fields. The relationship between the two countries has been further strengthened since President Truong Tan Sang and President Barack Obama launched a Comprehensive Partnership in 2013. The US-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership is a comprehensive framework that aims to improve the relationship between the two countries and underscores the US commitment to rebalance the Asia-Pacific region (U.S. Department Of State, 2013). In the decade since the establishment of the Comprehensive Partnership between Vietnam and the United States, the two countries have taken significant steps to enhance mutual understanding, build trust, and strengthen cooperation in all areas of the Comprehensive Partnership.

The relationship between Vietnam and the United States entered a new era on 10 September 2023, when the General Secretary of the Central Committee of Vietnam, Nguyen Phu Trong, and the President of the United States, Joe Biden, held a meeting and signed a comprehensive strategic partnership. This agreement marks the efforts of Vietnam and the United States to upgrade the status of their comprehensive partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership (The White House, 2013). The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Vietnam and the United States represents the highest level of diplomatic relations, signifying the highest position in Vietnam's diplomatic hierarchy. Therefore, upgrading diplomatic relations is a significant development considering that Vietnam's 'top tier' trading partners were previously Russia, China, India, and South Korea (Yanwardhana, 2023).

Both countries plan to strengthen coordination on regional and global issues of common concern and interest, contributing to joint efforts to maintain peace, stability, cooperation, and development in the region and the world. Under this new framework, the two leaders emphasize the fundamental principles that guide Vietnam-US relations, including respect for the Charter of the United Nations (UN), international law, and respect for each other's political systems, independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity (The White House, 2013). Vietnam and the United States will continue to deepen cooperation in these areas to safeguard the interests of their respective peoples and contribute to peace, stability, cooperation, and prosperity in the region and the world.

In addition, Vietnam and the United States pledge to enhance coordination and cooperation in regional and international forums such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Plus Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM Plus), as well as various ASEAN sectoral ministerial meetings (The White House, 2013). Both countries support the promotion of multilateralism, respect for international law, and an open and inclusive regional architecture in which ASEAN plays a central role. The United States has an unwavering commitment to Southeast Asia and, more broadly, to the Indo-Pacific (U.S. Embassy &

Consulates in Indonesia, 2023). President Biden's visit to Vietnam is a demonstration of the United States' respect for its relationship with Vietnam and Vietnam's role in the Indo-Pacific. Vietnam appreciates the United States' strong support for the centrality of ASEAN and ASEAN's views on the Indo-Pacific. US engagement with Southeast Asia was significantly boosted when Vice President Kamala Harris attended a series of meetings at the 26th ASEAN Summit in Jakarta, Indonesia. Vice President Kamala Harris also held one-on-one meetings with several ASEAN leaders, underscoring Washington's attention to bilateral relations amid growing U.S.-China regional competition (Stromseth, 2022).

The United States is the dominant power in the Indo-Pacific. Stretching from the Pacific coast to the Indian Ocean, the Indo-Pacific region is home to about half of the world's population, nearly two-thirds of the global economy, and the base of one of the world's seven most significant military powers (The White House, 2022). With projections that around two-thirds of global economic growth will occur in this region in the coming years, it is becoming increasingly important to the United States. From a US perspective, Vietnam plays a more strategically significant role in the Indo-Pacific strategic framework than long-standing US allies such as the Philippines and Thailand (Feyerabend, 2021).

The partnership between Vietnam and the United States has become crucial in the Indo-Pacific region's economic, political, and security dynamics. The evolving cooperation between these two countries is vital in maintaining stability and promoting growth in this region. Ultimately, this research aims to identify and analyze how the comprehensive strategic partnership between Vietnam and the United States influences the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region's economy, politics, and security.

Theoretical Framework

The author uses the concept of regionalism to address the objectives of this research. Regionalism refers to the process by which countries within a particular region interact, intending to incorporate the values, norms, and ideas of the international community. This interactive process manifests as cooperation covering various areas such as economics, security, political cooperation, and others through various dialogues and agreements. In other words, the study of regionalism not only focuses on the cooperative interactions between geographically adjacent countries but also emphasizes the processes that underpin this cooperation, particularly about the cohesive forces that unite countries in a cooperative region referred to as "regional" (Nuraeini et al., 2010). Amid new situations and new digitalization, regionalism emerges to show that the free market economy has been challenged and taken over by political maneuvering (Yuzhu, 2020). This means that the battle for technology and industry is becoming the central paradigm of competition among major nations, intensified by nations' concerns about industrial security, technological nationalism, and great power politics, the three main drivers of the new regionalism. Therefore, by considering the concept of regionalism, this research can provide a more comprehensive overview of cooperation and conflict in the region and understand their impact at the local and global levels, particularly the comprehensive strategic partnership between Vietnam and the United States on the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region.

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Method

The author uses a qualitative research method focusing on descriptive analysis. The qualitative method is an approach that involves social or human phenomena in a natural context (Nurdin & Hartati, 2019). This approach systematically explores, selects, and generalizes facts (Abdullah, 2017). The explanations provided to the readers will result in descriptions based on the events being studied. The object of this research is the comprehensive strategic partnership between Vietnam and the United States. Meanwhile, the object includes bilateral relations, foreign policy, economic cooperation, security, and factors involved in the comprehensive strategic partnership between Vietnam and the United States in the Indo-Pacific region. This research uses the technique of library research or literature review, where information, facts, and data are collected from various sources such as books, e-books, journals, e-journals, working papers, official government reports, and relevant articles and news. The data obtained is then processed and analyzed for validity.

Result and Discussion

Vietnam and the United States Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

The Vietnam War was a highly divisive conflict that left a lasting mark on both the United States and Vietnam. After years of hostility and isolation, the two countries have become partners focused on economic and regional security cooperation. However, challenges to their relationship include persistent human rights concerns, complex trade relations, and China's growing influence in the region. The evolving relationship between the United States and Vietnam is a critical component of regional stability in the Indo-Pacific. The relationship between Vietnam and the United States is characterized by an economic focus, particularly on trade and investment. Vietnam has become a significant trading partner for the United States, with bilateral trade set to exceed \$90 billion by 2021 (Atreides, 2023).

Since the declaration of the nine-dash line and the militarisation of forward positions in the Paracel and Spratly Islands, Vietnam has moved closer to the United States and significantly improved its relationship. The Vietnamese government, military, and air force share similar concerns with the United States about Chinese expansionism and encroachment in the South China Sea. Vietnam needs more assistance from the United States to build capacity and develop military capabilities (Burgess, 2021). The cooperation and assistance that the United States provides to Vietnam is essential in building the partnership and enhancing Vietnam's capacity to engage in ongoing disputes with China. Built on a foundation of trust and a shared desire to address the legacies of war, the Vietnam-US partnership has expanded rapidly, covering diverse areas such as economics, politics, security, people-to-people ties, science and technology, health, climate, energy, education, human rights, and more. Vietnam and the United States are strong and evolving partners that aim to realize an open, connected, prosperous, resilient, and peaceful Indo-Pacific (U.S. Embassy in Singapore, 2023).

Both countries have made significant progress in the decade since President Truong Tan Sang and President Barack Obama established the comprehensive partnership between Vietnam and the United States. On 10 September 2023, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Trong and US President Joseph R. Biden elevated the relationship between the two countries to a comprehensive strategic partnership (The White House, 2013). Within this new framework, the two leaders emphasized the fundamental principles that guide the relationship between Vietnam and the United States. These principles include respect for the United Nations Charter and international law, as well as respect for each country's political system, independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. To support a broader vision of bilateral cooperation, strengthen institutional ties, and expand more innovative economic engagement, including support for the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), the United States and Vietnam are expanding engagement through the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and announcing new initiatives. These initiatives include investing in innovative economies, collaborating on science and technology, mentoring and training each other, deepening trade cooperation, and protecting humans (The White House, 2023). A key component of Biden's visit is supporting the semiconductor supply chain in Vietnam, even as Vietnam seeks to improve its manufacturing capabilities in Hanoi's semiconductor chip industry.

Given the complex history between Vietnam and the United States during the Vietnam War, the strengthening of this partnership is a significant step forward. Despite Vietnam's reluctance, both sides were motivated to improve bilateral relations. The geopolitics of China's military expansion in the Pacific, particularly around Vietnam's waters and the South China Sea, has been a significant obstacle to greater Vietnamese military involvement. Conversely, the complex historical relationship between Vietnam and the United States during the Vietnam War and historical ties with communist countries such as China and the Soviet Union simultaneously created a policy direction opposed to US interests (Pant et al., 2023). This complex foreign policy legacy is why Vietnam has a "comprehensive strategic partnership" with only four countries: China, Russia, India, and South Korea. This comprehensive strategic partnership represents the highest diplomatic level in Vietnam's diplomatic hierarchy.

Moreover, as the partnership expands through increased investment, there is scope to link the partnership with like-minded partners in the wider Indo-Pacific region. India's Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (ICET) partnership with the United States is evolving. It provides a framework to illuminate the Indo-Pacific region as a standard for technology in design, development, and use (Pant et al., 2023). This is advantageous for Vietnam as the supply chain extends from Vietnam to Europe through West Asia and docks in India, with the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor symbolizing a 'comprehensive strategic partnership.'

The Impact of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Vietnam and the United States in the Indo-Pacific Region

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The comprehensive strategic partnership between Vietnam and the United States in enhancing economic cooperation, regional security, constructive diplomacy, and cultural exchanges has the potential to significantly influence the economic, political, and security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region. The Vietnam-US partnership can create opportunities for closer economic cooperation and contribute to a more stable and sustainable geopolitical environment in the Indo-Pacific region. In addition, the partnership with Vietnam allows the United States to strengthen its presence in the region and provide strategic and security support to maintain stability.

Increased bilateral investment and trade between the two countries can boost economic growth. In the context of the Indo-Pacific, this economic cooperation can shape a broader economic footprint, creating strong trade and investment networks. Vietnam's digital economy is proliferating, with the number of internet users in the country increasing by 22.86% in two years, reaching 84.92 million users (86%), compared to 70% of total internet users in 2020 (Kusnandar, 2022). According to the e-Conomy SEA 2023 report, Vietnam continues to have the highest economic growth rate in the region for the second consecutive year (2022-2023). It is expected to maintain this position until 2025 (Google, 2023). Meanwhile, a key element of President Biden's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) is a focus on the digital economy. The US government has shown an interest in promoting economic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in developing digital technology and trade. This includes strengthening digital infrastructure, addressing digital trade barriers, and developing regulatory frameworks supporting digital economic growth. In this regard, the United States can work with Vietnam to accelerate its digital transformation and support the rapid growth of its digital economy. These efforts can include building secure digital infrastructure to expand reliable internet access and developing regulations for cross-border data flows (Tran, 2022). Establishing a balanced and effective regulatory framework for digital trade between Vietnam and the United States can set a positive precedent for similar cooperation elsewhere in the region. This can help overcome barriers and regulatory differences hindering digital economic growth across the Indo-Pacific.

In addition, the comprehensive strategic partnership between Vietnam and the United States also significantly strengthens Vietnam's defense capabilities and enhances regional security, particularly in the context of geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific. Security cooperation can include joint efforts to address regional security threats such as maritime security, terrorism, and transnational crime. This can enhance stability in the Indo-Pacific and create a greater sense of security among countries in the region. This partnership can also play a critical role in responding to and adapting to the role of other major powers in the Indo-Pacific, such as China. Cooperation between Vietnam and the United States can help mitigate the adverse effects of broader geopolitical competition. Given Vietnam's strategic location in the Indo-Pacific, the partnership with Vietnam allows the United States to strengthen its regional presence and provide strategic support in maintaining security stability.

As the strategic competition between the United States and China has intensified in recent years, Southeast Asia has become a critical region where this rivalry is played out. Vietnam is the only country in Southeast Asia to have experienced direct military confrontation with several major powers, especially during the height of the Cold War. This occurred as major powers adjusted their relationships, such as when the United States and China improved their relations in the early 1970s in response to geostrategic shifts (Son, 2023). Vietnam is, therefore, highly sensitive to the escalation of strategic competition and aware of its impact on relations with major countries. Ultimately, economic, political, and security cooperation between Vietnam and the United States through a comprehensive strategic partnership significantly influences stability and security in the Indo-Pacific region. This means that both countries can contribute to addressing regional disputes and conflicts. This includes supporting diplomatic efforts, peace initiatives, and conflict resolution that can promote political stability in the Indo-Pacific.

Challenges and Opportunities of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Vietnam and the United States

The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership places the United States on an equal footing with China and Russia in Vietnam's diplomatic hierarchy despite the geopolitical realities that align Washington and Hanoi in facing the same threat from Beijing (Myers, n.d.). The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is neither a formal military alliance nor a fundamental change. Instead, it reflects an accelerated improvement in the bilateral relationship between Vietnam and the United States, particularly in the economic and people-to-people spheres. Vietnam occupies a geopolitically crucial position in the Indo-Pacific region's strategic dynamics between China and the United States. It thus faces numerous opportunities and challenges within this partnership. As geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific increases, this partnership faces challenges in maintaining a balance in its relations with other parties, especially China.

One perceived benefit is the possibility of cooperation between the Trump administration and Vietnam in a spirit of mutual benefit. Prospects for political, economic, cultural, social, security, and defense cooperation with the United States will continue to grow, with Vietnam potentially becoming a focal point of US foreign policy, particularly about the South China Sea policy. In addition, this partnership offers opportunities to strengthen regional security through cooperation in addressing common security threats such as maritime security and terrorism. However, regarding challenges and difficulties, particularly in the trade relationship, Vietnam has a trade surplus and exports significantly to the United States. As a result, Vietnam needs to be prepared for the possibility of the United States implementing protectionist measures that could create barriers to Vietnam's trade (Tien et al., 2021). Changes in global and regional economic conditions also affect economic cooperation between the two countries, requiring adaptation and adjustment. While Vietnam may welcome the US approach on many issues, the new Indo-Pacific strategy's emphasis on 'democratic institutions' and 'democratic governance' may intimidate Hanoi and hinder deeper bilateral cooperation. Going forward, the Biden administration should emphasize cooperation in these areas and tailor its messages to Vietnamese society.

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Competition is also necessary to maintain the regional balance of power. It is well understood, though not often explicitly acknowledged in Vietnam, that without this competition, the region would be dominated by a hegemonic unipolar order, making ASEAN less relevant (Son, 2023). Strategic competition can give ASEAN more outstanding agency and strategic space as primary and middle powers pivot to the Indo-Pacific, increasing their interest in the region. Strategic competition also provides opportunities for ASEAN member states to diversify their relationships, maintain strategic autonomy through trade, and reduce dependence, particularly on China. Rather than passively trying to distance themselves from the competition, Vietnam, the United States, and countries in the wider Indo-Pacific region should take proactive steps to manage it. These steps aim to make the competition 'healthy' by preventing both major countries from taking actions that could undermine regional stability and relations.

Conclusion

The gradual and incremental development of bilateral relations between Vietnam and the United States has resulted in a partnership demonstrating significant progress in their cooperation. The comprehensive strategic partnership between the two nations has significantly boosted Vietnam's economic growth. Investment, trade, and cooperation in various economic sectors have strengthened Vietnam's integration into the Indo-Pacific regional economic network. In the digital age, cooperation in technology and innovation has become a key factor. The cooperation between Vietnam and the United States in this field has opened up new opportunities and accelerated digital transformation in the Indo-Pacific region. On the other hand, this partnership also creates opportunities for more constructive diplomacy, facilitating dialogue between nations and reducing tensions at the regional level. Therefore, the comprehensive strategic partnership between Vietnam and the United States is crucial in shaping the Indo-Pacific region's economic, political, and security dynamics. This study concludes that this cooperation not only strengthens both countries but also positively impacts the broader stability and development of the region.

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