

## Vietnam Gradually Warms Up to US Military

The gradual evolution of U.S.-Vietnamese political and defense ties reflects Hanoi's caution.

By Carl Thayer  
November 06, 2013



Last month the United States and Vietnam held two important annual high-level security meetings in Washington: the 6th Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue and the 4th Defense Policy Dialogue.

The **6th U.S.-Vietnam Political, Security and Defense Dialogue** was held on October 1 at deputy minister level. The U.S. was represented by Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs Tom Kelly, and Vietnam was represented by Deputy Foreign Minister Ha Kim Ngoc.

This dialogue has a wide-ranging agenda that touches on the full-spectrum of political, security and defense issues of concern. This is reflected in the composition of the representatives that attend.

The U.S. delegation included representatives from the Department of State, Department of Defense, Agency for International Development and the U.S. Pacific Command. The Vietnamese delegation included representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Public Security and Ministry of National Defense.

The agenda for the 6th U.S.-Vietnam Political, Security and Defense Dialogue included counterterrorism, counternarcotics, human trafficking, cyber, law enforcement, defense and security, disaster response, search and rescue, war legacy issues and cooperation in regional organizations such as ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit.

The **4th U.S.-Vietnam Defense Policy Dialogue** is also held at deputy minister level and involves officials from their respective defense ministries. The fourth dialogue was held in Washington on October 28-29. The U.S. was represented by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia Vikram Singh, and Vietnam was represented by Deputy Minister for National Defense Senior Lt. Gen. Nguyen Chi Vinh.

Both dialogues were held within the framework of the Memorandum of Understanding on Advancing Bilateral Defense Cooperation signed on September 19, 2011 and the **U.S.-Vietnam Joint Statement** of July 25, 2013.

The 2011 MOU set out five priority areas for bilateral defense cooperation: regular high-level dialogues between the Department of Defense and the Ministry of National Defense, maritime security, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and peacekeeping. The MOU, in fact, was a codification of activities that were already being carried out. The MOU was also a transparency measure designed to mitigate – to the extent possible – Beijing's fears of U.S.-Vietnam military collusion against China.



Image Credit: Official White House Photo by Pete Souza

The U.S.-Vietnam defense dialogues are conducted in the shadow of Vietnam War era legacies. Vietnam uses these occasions to announce progress in the search for American service personnel Missing in Action (MIA). For example, during the June 2012 visit to Hanoi by Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, Vietnam announced that it was opening three new sites for MIA searches. This statement came on the eve of the **5th Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue**. At the 2nd U.S.-Vietnam Defense Policy Dialogue in September 2011 Vietnam handed over six dossiers related to MIA searches.

Washington uses the occasion of defense dialogues to reaffirm continuing commitment to clearing up Vietnam War era unexploded ordnance and the toxic effects of Agent Orange. At the 2nd Defense Policy Dialogue, for example, the U.S. stated that it would continue to assist Vietnam in overcoming the “aftermath of war,” a euphemism for unexploded ordnance and dioxin poisoning.

U.S.-Vietnam defense cooperation under the 2011 MOU has proceeded at a cautious and gradual pace. Just prior to the signing of the MOU the first U.S. Military Sealift Command vessel underwent minor repairs in Cam Ranh Bay. Four other Military Sealift Command vessels were serviced there after the MOU was signed. Each repair was valued at under half a million US dollars.

In October 2011 the commandant of Vietnam’s National Defense Academy addressed staff and students at the U.S. National Defense University. For the first time, Vietnam sent one student each to the U.S. National War College and the U.S. Naval Staff College.

From June to August 2012, Vietnam sent its first observer to the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC). In July 2012, the U.S. hosted Vietnam’s Steering Board 501, which has responsibility for dealing with unexploded ordnance. In October of the same year, the USS *George Washington* aircraft carrier hosted a fly out by a delegation of Vietnamese officials in international waters off Vietnam’s eastern coast.

In 2012, Vietnam hosted visits by a number of senior U.S. officials, including the Commander of the U.S. 7th Fleet (January); Panetta (June); the Commander of the US Pacific Fleet (July); and a delegation from the U.S. National Defense University (October). In April, Vietnam hosted the third naval exchange activity in the port of Da Nang involving salvage and disaster training but no live-firing exercises or exchange of combat skills.

In 2013 Vietnam hosted the 3rd Defense Policy Dialogue in January and the fourth non-combat naval exchange activity in Da Nang the following April.

In a significant development, last June the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff hosted the first visit by the Chief of the General Staff of the Vietnam People’s Army (and Deputy Minister of National Defense), General Do Ba Ty. Ty’s delegation included the commander of Vietnam’s Air Force and the deputy commanders of the Navy and General Intelligence Department. His trip included a visit to the Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington state suggesting future possible joint activities.

A high-point in U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relations was reached in July 2013 when U.S. President Barack Obama hosted his counterpart, Truong Tan Sang, at the White House. The two presidents agreed to open a “new phase of bilateral relations” by forming a **U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership**.

The Joint Statement issued by the two presidents included nine points. Point six addressed war legacy issues and point seven covered defense and security cooperation. No major initiatives were announced in keeping with the evolutionary nature of bilateral defense ties.

Both presidents expressed satisfaction with the implementation of the 2011 MOU and reaffirmed their commitment to its full implementation. Both agreed to continue the Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue and the Defense Policy Dialogue.

As for future cooperation, both presidents decided to expand cooperation to enhance Vietnam’s search and rescue and disaster response capabilities and step up cooperation in non-traditional security. The Joint Statement flagged counterterrorism, maritime law enforcement, transitional crime (piracy, high-tech crime, and narcotics, human and wildlife smuggling) and cyber security. President Obama offered to assist with training and other support for Vietnam’s first involvement in a United Nations peacekeeping operation.

The agenda for the 4th U.S.-Vietnam Defense Policy Dialogue included regional and international security issues, maritime security, war legacy issues (including information on Vietnamese MIAs), cooperation in multilateral forums such as the **ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus**, U.S. assistance

for Vietnam's first commitment to UN peacekeeping, and the cooperation plan for 2014.

Vinh handed over four files containing information on new MIA search sites. Singh pledged increased support for cleaning up Agent Orange and clearing up unexploded ordnance.

What was new? The two sides agreed to step up cooperation between their navies and their respective defense academies and institutions. A MOU was signed on cooperation between the U.S. and Vietnamese Coast Guards (formerly Marine Police).

The gradual evolution of U.S.-Vietnamese political, security and defense dialogues reflects Vietnam's cautious approach in keeping its relations with China and the United States evenly balanced. Vietnam, for example, has so far refrained from engaging in military exercises with the U.S.

Vietnam limits the U.S. Navy to one port call per year and continues to bar U.S. Navy warships from entry to Cam Ranh Bay. Also, Vietnam has yet to approve a request made by Secretary Panetta in June 2012 to set up an Office of Defense Cooperation in the US Embassy in Hanoi.

Vietnam is also displeased at what it considers an inadequate U.S. commitment to clearing up the legacies of war. In an interview immediately after the 4th Defense Policy Dialogue, **General Vinh stated**, "a better defense relationship should be based on the efficiency of practical cooperation, including overcoming [the] aftermath of war... Generally speaking, the U.S. has offered Vietnam active cooperation in this issue, but it not enough as the consequences of war are terrible." General Vinh also noted that in his opinion "we must build strategic trust between the two countries' top leaders..."

This remark may be a reference to continuing U.S. restrictions on the sale of arms to Vietnam despite direct requests by Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and Defense Minister General Phung Quang Thanh to Secretary Panetta in June 2012.

Under the International Trafficking in Arms Regulations the U.S. can only sell Vietnam certain non-lethal defense items and services on a case-by-case basis. The sale of lethal weapons and some non-lethal items such as night vision goggles are still banned.

Recently Vietnam took the initiative to address the issue of strategic trust. In late August, on the sidelines of the ADMM Plus meeting in Brunei, Vietnam's Defense Minister invited Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel to visit in 2014. Hagel accepted.

Under an agreement reached in 2003, Vietnam and the United States agreed to exchange alternate visits by their defense ministers every three years. Vietnam's defense minister visited Washington in 2003 and 2009. The U.S. Defense Secretary visited Hanoi in 2006 and 2012. Hagel's visit may signal the end of the three yearly cycle and more frequent contact between defense ministers.

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John Lone  
November 10, 2013 at 04:35

Other way around is true as well, Japan and VN may decide to persude independence full flegde nuclear armed nations which mean less and less reply on Uncle Sam for security and for china containment. Question will be how America should act and how china must behave if both cannot accept nuclear armed Japan or/and VN.

[Reply](#)

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Little Helmsman  
November 7, 2013 at 03:27

Some Viet commies want warmer ties with the US and some (China faction) do not. Washington has all the leverage because Viet commies are scared as hell of Commie China, their former ally and ideological mentor. Vietnam under VC is closer to China ideologically, in outlook, political culture, and ruthlessness. Real allies of US are other democracies in the region like Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Australia, and Taiwan. US policymakers are only using little VC to their own advantage of countering the bigger threat of China. No consequential US policymakers have any