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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, R.I.**

**AN ENGAGED VIETNAM: DEVELOPING A
U.S. PACIFIC COMMAND SOLUTION**

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
SECTION 1 Leveraging Key Regional Partners and Alliances	4
SECTION 2 Multinational Exercises	7
SECTION 3 Bilateral Training	12
CONCLUSION	17
RECOMMENDATIONS	18
BIBLIOGRAPHY	19

ABSTRACT

Since opening diplomatic relations with Vietnam nearly twenty years ago, the United States and Vietnam have exercised measured and cautious bilateral security cooperation. During the same period, both nations' influences within the Asia-Pacific region have grown substantially. Vietnam has developed a complex approach to its national security, focusing on economic growth and stability, which has been enabled primarily through expanding and strengthening regional and global relationships, to include with the United States. As the United States moves forward in its cooperative relationship with Vietnam, U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) is in a unique position to shape that relationship. This paper examines how USPACOM can implement a theater security cooperation plan with Vietnam that strengthens partnerships and enhances security preparedness throughout the region, improves the interoperability of Vietnamese forces with the U.S. and others in region, and effectively meets the demands of shared interests and shared threats while meeting standing directives and agreements.

Introduction

The United States opened diplomatic relations with Vietnam in 1995. As a result of keen diplomatic, political, and social disagreements, as well as unresolved war legacy issues, the first fifteen years of this resuscitated relationship have been characterized by both sides taking progressive, yet cautious and measured steps towards building stronger security cooperation and economic ties to meet the challenges of overlapping security and economic interests within Southeast Asia and the South China Sea.¹

During that same year, Vietnam joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as its seventh member. These collective steps were the result of Vietnam's evolving national strategy, which sought to preserve the standing communist regime through rapid but sustainable economic market development, expanding relationships with regional neighbors and other global powers which would enhance its security and economic stability, and by deepening its relationship with China.² To be clear, Vietnam placed a premium on its economic growth as the key to its security, while simultaneously building relationships that would promote that economic growth and contribute to its security. The relationship with the United States was one of many Vietnam fostered; it was by no means the most important from the Vietnamese perspective.

Faced with the realities of their growing economy, mounting tensions over territorial claims within the South China Sea, and the widening gap between other regional actors' naval capacities and their own ability to project power and protect economic interests, Vietnam shifted its defense priorities beginning in the late 1990s to meet those needs. That

¹ William S. Cohen and Maurice R. Greenberg, "Developing an Enduring Strategy for ASEAN," A Report of the Center for Strategic and International Studies U.S.-ASEAN Strategy Commission (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 2012), 12.

² Mark E. Manyin, "U.S.-Vietnam Relations in 2013: Current Issues and Implications for U.S. Policy," (Washington: Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, 26 July 2013), 2.

shift reflected the increasing reliance on the maritime domain, and sparked an effort by Vietnam to rapidly modernize its navy as its top military priority.³ As it took steps to modernize its Navy, Vietnam carefully aligned its expanding security cooperation with those partners that could assist in their naval aspirations, particularly powers such as Russia, India, and China, and at a slower pace, the United States.

Between 2000 and 2009, the Vietnamese worked hard to ensure that interaction with each partner was not perceived by others as a one-sided attempt to align with a single ally.⁴ During this period, Vietnamese bilateral security cooperation with the United States was particularly measured, with little progress on anything that might adversely impact “the relationships about which the Vietnamese were most concerned: bilateral links with China, multilateral links with Southeast Asian neighbors, and organized interaction with ASEAN.”⁵

Beginning in 2010, however, both the United States and Vietnam sought to significantly grow their military-to-military relationship, driven largely by successes of small, trust-building programs over the previous decade and the two countries’ growing concerns over China’s expanding influence – and specifically China’s increasingly coercive actions over territorial disputes in the South China Sea.⁶ The most significant step towards increasing bilateral security cooperation and strengthening the military-to-military relationship between the two governments came in September 2011, when the heads of the U.S. Department of Defense and Vietnam’s Ministry of Defense signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) outlining five key areas that the two countries agreed would have the greatest effects on enhancing interoperability, protecting shared interests, and contributing to

³ James Hackett, *The Military Balance 2013* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2013), 275.

⁴ William Jordan, Lewis M. Stern, and Walter Lohman, “U.S.-Vietnam Defense Relations: Investing in Strategic Alignment,” *Backgrounders*, no. 2707 (2012), <http://report.heritage.org/bg2707>, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶ Manyin, “U.S.-Vietnam Relations in 2013: Current Issues and Implications for U.S. Policy,” 22.

regional security, all while preserving existing regional partnerships maintained by both countries.⁷

As the United States moves forward with Vietnam, within the parameters of the current MOU, our approach must be clear, achievable, and flexible to react to changing policy aims and momentum of the relationship, on both sides.⁸ Because U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) has been a constant security and diplomatic presence throughout the Pacific for over five decades, it is ideally suited to expand bilateral ties with Vietnam and leverage regional relationships that will promote a holistic and symbiotic Vietnamese growth in regional influence. As the two countries' navies take on increased importance in their respective national strategies and the regional security architecture, USPACOM should prioritize its bilateral cooperation and training efforts with the Vietnamese to its navy, with particular emphasis on Maritime Security, Search and Rescue, and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief operations. The keys to USPACOM success in engaging with the Vietnamese are leveraging key regional partners and alliances within ASEAN; encouraging Vietnamese participation in major multinational exercises within the western Pacific region; and increasing bilateral training with emphasis on the Vietnamese Navy and its significant role in the maritime domain. These three focus areas will have the best effects towards building Vietnamese capacity without provoking China, capitalizing on the increasing contributions of Vietnam's Navy on unilateral and shared interests, and remaining consistent with both U.S. and Vietnamese approaches to regional security.

⁷ The five areas of increased cooperation are: Maritime Security Operations (MSO); Search and Rescue (SAR) operations; improving skills that would make Vietnamese forces attractive for selection to U.N. Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO); Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations; and collaboration between defense universities and increased exchanges of professional military personnel.

⁸ U.S. Naval War College, "Design and Theater Campaign Planning Compendium," (Newport, RI, 2013), 43.

Leveraging Key Regional Partners and Alliances

As Vietnam expanded its international relations in pursuit of national interests, it also became more dependent on what author David W.P. Elliott has termed “comprehensive security”.⁹ Elliott argues that the Vietnamese approach of comprehensive security linked the interdependence of socioeconomic development to national defense and security. The approach also considered internal security and political and economic stability, which would be achieved through successful economic development, as their primary concern, and military security and external threats were considered secondary.¹⁰

Nguyen Van Linh, the general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam from 1986-1991, outlined an early version of Vietnam’s approach to comprehensive security in 1989. He wrote, “You cannot protect the Fatherland without a strong military. But political, economic, and diplomatic factors also play a key role in the mission of defending the country.”¹¹

In pursuing its national security and national interests, Vietnam also recognized the importance of “being proactive in shaping a favorable environment to safeguard Vietnam’s interests, the idea of interdependence... and of leveraging membership in regional and global organizations to multiply and extend Vietnam’s influence on the world scene” as key elements to its new concept of international relations.¹² With this framework in mind, the Vietnamese began taking active steps to expand its economic and diplomatic connections.

James Goldrick and Jack McCaffrie suggest that Vietnam’s most significant step in joining the international community was becoming the seventh member of the Association of

⁹ David W.P. Elliott, *Changing Worlds: Vietnam’s Transition from Cold War to Globalization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 243.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 244.

¹² *Ibid.*, 250.

Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on 28 July 1995.¹³ In concert with their vital security decision to join the ASEAN community, Vietnamese leaders wrote, “It is necessary to proactively move to a new stage of development and peaceful coexistence with China, ASEAN, and the United States, and build Southeast Asia into a region of peace, stability, and cooperation.”¹⁴

As ASEAN’s influence rapidly grew throughout the region, the United States also recognized the organization as a key strategic foundation upon which it can promote American – and partners’ – interests in the Asia-Pacific region while weaving the tapestry of security, diplomatic, political, and economic interdependence among its nations to make conflict undesirable. Analysts and authors William S. Cohen and Maurice R. Greenberg of the Center for Strategic and International Studies write, “The United States sees the Association of Southeast Asia Nations as the foundation of a newly developing economic and security architecture that will shape the Asia-Pacific region for the twenty-first century.”¹⁵ These conclusions, and the United States’ renewed and expanding interest in the Asia-Pacific region, have ushered a progressive U.S. reliance on ASEAN and its associated groupings as key forums for regional engagement.

During a June 2012 joint press briefing between U.S. Secretary of Defense and Vietnamese Minister of Defense General Phung Quang Thanh in Hanoi, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta made clear the importance of Vietnam’s relationship within the ASEAN community and how the United States views that relationship. He said, “We also discussed how the U.S. could work with Vietnam in the ASEAN defense ministers group to

¹³ James Goldrick and Jack McCaffrie, *Navies of South-east Asia: A Comparative Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2013), 202.

¹⁴ Elliott, *Changing Worlds*, 248.

¹⁵ Cohen and Greenberg, “Developing an Enduring Strategy for ASEAN,” 12.

try to improve the maritime rights of all nations.” Secretary Panetta went on to elaborate that he believed “that the United States and Vietnam can build a better future, not only for our people but for the entire Asia-Pacific region.”¹⁶

“While alliances and bilateral ties are foundational to U.S. interests in the Asia Pacific, the United States must also pursue its strategic objectives through deepening its involvement in regional institutions.”¹⁷ This deepening process helps to align collective security and political issues by working with, and through, each other to build cooperative solutions to mutual interests and objectives. The United States must also encourage ASEAN member nations to work closely together to develop relationships among themselves that promote their respective unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral interests and further common goals within the region. These relationships are a fundamental mechanism to reach peaceful solutions to common issues, to promote regional harmony and stability, and to deepen interdependence.

At present, some of the most significant issues faced by Southeast Asia, and those nations who hold interests in the Asia-Pacific, are the challenges associated with encouraging China to continue its peaceful rise. While most nations recognize that a peacefully rising China brings enormous economic benefits to the region and the world, there is a rising demand to convince China “not to encroach on the sovereignty or established rights of its neighbors or to disrupt or limit access to vital sea-lanes of navigation in the South China Sea.”¹⁸ At least four ASEAN member nations maintain territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. The four ASEAN claimants to territories in the South China Sea are

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, Joint Press Briefing with Secretary Panetta and Vietnamese Minister of Defense General Phung Quang Thanh from Hanoi, Vietnam. Washington, DC: DOD, 2012, <http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=5052>.

¹⁷ Cohen and Greenberg, “Developing an Enduring Strategy for ASEAN,” 13.

¹⁸ Ibid., 14.

Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam.¹⁹ The United States should encourage each of these countries to work closely together, using ASEAN and other regional forums to address these priority issues in an effort to maintain assured access for all in the maritime domain commons, as well as to promote regional stability.²⁰

Current USPACOM strategy makes clear that the combatant command will “work with regional forums such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and encourage multilateral relationships that build trust, prevent misperceptions that can lead to conflict, and reinforce international norms of conduct.”²¹

Leveraging key regional partners and alliances within ASEAN and other regional forums will assist and perhaps accelerate Vietnam’s economic growth and security cooperation within the region. As has been demonstrated, this certainly aligns with both the United States and Vietnam’s strategic approaches towards regional stability. Lastly, it is one of the best ways to promote shared interests of multiple nations without communicating threatening positions that would undermine the critical economic, security, and diplomatic linkages that are forged through cooperative participation in the organizations. The close relationships and interdependence forged by member nations during regional forum and ASEAN-related activities make participation in bilateral and multinational exercises a natural extension of collective efforts to coordinate all instruments of their respective national powers.

Multinational Exercises

One of the most important methods for building relationships and trust, and enriching interdependence is to conduct relevant and comprehensive multinational exercises and

¹⁹ Cohen and Greenberg, “Developing an Enduring Strategy for ASEAN,” 24.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

²¹ Samuel J. Locklear, III. *USPACOM Strategy* (Honolulu, HI, 2013).

training. Multinational exercises are one of the fundamental mechanisms used by Combatant Commanders to promote regional stability and contribute to the National Security Strategy. These exercises strengthen existing partnerships and help to build new relationships, and are particularly effective when designed to build collective capacity to deal with common challenges faced by members of existing multilateral constructs such as ASEAN.²² Within PACOM's Area of Responsibility (AOR), it is certainly no coincidence that many of the participants of these exercises are also working closely with one another in key International Organizations like ASEAN.

As was already pointed out, besides Vietnam, three ASEAN members – Brunei, Malaysia, and the Philippines – maintain territorial claims within the South China Sea. Each of them also participates with the United States in multiple bilateral and multinational security cooperation exercises throughout the western Pacific. The potential value of capitalizing on these ASEAN South China Sea claimants' participation cannot be overstated, and Vietnam would be wise to become a participant in as many of these exercises as their strategic interests and complex foreign policy will bear. This will be an increasingly important mechanism to build trust with the United States and other partners, as the U.S. and Vietnam exercise the 2011 Memorandum of Understanding. Many of these exercises afford multiple events that support the MOU focus areas of maritime security, search and rescue, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Clearly, this will help to build Vietnamese capacity and increase interoperability with the U.S. and others, and will enable the Vietnamese to take on increasing responsibility in regional security cooperation.

Vietnam's participation in regional multinational exercises is not without precedent. In 2002, Vietnam sent military observers to Thailand to observe limited aspects of *Cobra*

²² Locklear, USPACOM Strategy, 2013.

Gold 2002. In 2004, Vietnamese observers attended submarine rescue exercises in South Korea during the *2004 Pacific Reach* exercise.²³ *Pacific Reach 2004* was a five-nation exercise aimed at mobilizing assets worldwide in the unlikely event a submarine becomes disabled and cannot return to the surface on its own.²⁴ While initial Vietnamese participation in multinational exercises had been limited to observation roles, it was a mechanism to promote bilateral interaction with the potential expanding to major multinational exercise participation. However, beyond targeted bilateral interaction, very little open-source reporting is available to illustrate participation by Vietnamese forces in multinational exercises beyond these early observational roles.

As USPACOM pursues expanded cooperation with the Vietnamese military, two multinational exercises in particular should be prioritized for targeting Vietnamese participation: *Cobra Gold* and *Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC)*. Both exercises have significant events and components that satisfy the focus areas within the MOU between the U.S. and Vietnam, and both exercises host significant constituents from Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific regions, including Malaysia and the Philippines, both of which also maintain territorial disputes with China over the South China Sea.

Cobra Gold is an annual multinational exercise conducted in the Kingdom of Thailand that is designed to build relationships among partner nations, to enhance interoperability across the range of military operations, and to promote peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. *Cobra Gold* has grown to become the largest multinational exercise in the region. In 2013, over 13,000 service members from seven nations met in the Kingdom

²³ Goldrick and McCaffrie, *Navies of South-east Asia*, 203.

²⁴ Kyung Choi, "U.S. Foreign Navies Practice Submarine Rescue, Foster Cooperation, and Improve Interoperability," *Undersea Warfare, Summer 2004* http://www.navy.mil/navydata/cno/n87/usw/issue_23/reach2004.htm.

of Thailand to meet exercise objectives and promote regional stability. Participating countries included the Kingdom of Thailand, United States, Singapore, Japan, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, and Malaysia.

In an effort to expand regional partnerships and strengthen multilateral relationships during the 2013 exercise, the Kingdom of Thailand invited representatives from Burma, the Peoples Republic of China, Laos, New Zealand, and South Africa to observe key events within the *Cobra Gold* exercise schedule. They were collectively designated as the Coalition Observer Liaison Team (COLT), the representatives observed aspects of the exercise which showcased crisis planning and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations. The intent was to open the door for new regional partnerships, strengthen multilateral relationships, address common global challenges, and advance shared interests.²⁵

When asked his thoughts on the value of participating in the multinational exercise, Colonel Lei Ming, the senior member of the PRC's observer group, remarked, "We could strengthen the mutual understanding of other countries' nav[ies] and other countries' troops to enhance our friendship and training levels together."²⁶

A senior New Zealand Defense Attaché representative clearly summed up the prospect of participation in future *Cobra Gold* exercises by stating, "*Cobra Gold*, for us, has become something to be part of for strategic reasons. It was really an opportunity for us to reinforce the ties between other nations."²⁷

The invitation to participate and the subsequent sentiments of key observers highlight the importance of relationship and trust building among nations with shared interests. More

²⁵ Catherine Sinclair, "Reinforcing National Ties Through Multinational Cooperation," <http://www.dvidshub.net/news/101904/reinforcing-national-ties-through-multinational-cooperation#UnLCqZHqEds>, 2013.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

importantly, comments from the observers, who could be considered potential partners or potential adversaries, validate the effectiveness of the exercises to build capacity and interoperability in transparent, non-threatening ways, and to effectively contribute to collective security cooperation.

Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) is the world's largest international maritime warfare exercise. Hosted by Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet (PACFLT), *RIMPAC* is held biannually in Hawaii, and it is one of the cornerstones of USPACOM's efforts to enhance interoperability of the region's maritime forces and to foster cooperative relationships that are critical to ensuring the safety of sea-lanes and security on the world's oceans. In 2012, the year of the most recent *RIMPAC*, the exercise included over 40 ships and submarines, 200 aircraft, and 25,000 personnel from twenty-two countries including Australia, Canada, Chile, Colombia, France, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Peru, the Republic of Korea, the Republic of the Philippines, Russia, Singapore, Thailand, Tonga, and the United Kingdom.²⁸ To help fund their nation's force participation in the vital exercise, many of the smaller countries on this list relied heavily on U.S. Security Assistance that had been secured as a result of relationship and trust-building programs and successful bilateral security cooperation with the United States. While there is no evidence yet in open source reporting that Vietnam plans to participate in *RIMPAC* 2014, the increased cooperation between the U.S. and Vietnam makes Vietnamese participation in *RIMPAC* 2016 a worthy goal. Considering that China has agreed to participate in the 2014 exercise, having Vietnam join in subsequent exercises would be highly desirable in the pursuit of regional stability and cooperation.

²⁸ RIMPAC 2012, U.S. Pacific Fleet, Accessed on September 16, 2013. <http://www.cpf.navy.mil/rimpac/2012/about/>.

Securing Vietnam's participation in multinational exercises in the western Pacific region is a critical step towards increased cooperation with Vietnam. These exercises afford all participants the chance to build trust and strengthen relationships, increase capacity and enhance interoperability, and address issues regarding shared interests and shared threats in a highly transparent and cooperative way. Vietnam's participation in the exercises will also help to strengthen regional stability while remaining consistent with the two nations' complex foreign policies, expanding partnerships, and enduring security cooperation objectives.

Bilateral Training

Bilateral training is one of the fundamental mechanisms for countries to enhance interoperability, strengthen relationships, and build trust, all of which are critical to effective security cooperation and partnership. With that in mind, there are two ways USPACOM can use bilateral training to positively influence Vietnamese military modernization and help them contribute to regional stability. The first is through *direct* U.S. – Vietnamese bilateral training. The second is an *indirect* method that relies on regional partners and friends to conduct their own bilateral training with Vietnam.

U.S. – Vietnamese: As previously noted, the September 2011 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) outlined five key areas in which the two countries agreed to expand military-to-military and security cooperation. They were: maritime security operations (MSO); search and rescue (SAR); skills that would make Vietnam an attractive force for selection to UN Peace Keeping Operations (UNPKO); Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR); and collaboration between defense universities and increased exchanges of

professional military personnel. These areas were specifically chosen in an effort to promote regional stability, enable Vietnam to contribute to security on both the regional and, potentially, global levels, and to reduce China's perception of the cooperation having provocative signatures. From the U.S. perspective, robust cooperation beyond the MOU is desired, but cannot be enacted until certain diplomatic, political, and social issues within Vietnam show improvement.

In consideration of how recently this historic agreement was signed, the time it takes to institute social and civil reforms which have thus far limited interaction, and the time it takes to build the requisite trust to expand cooperative efforts, it will be necessary to establish bilateral military cooperation and training events that fall into the five categories contained in the MOU for the foreseeable future.

As USPACOM plans training events and security cooperation with Vietnam within the boundaries of the MOU, efforts must be aimed at building our own relationship with Vietnam, positively enhancing regional stability and collective security cooperation, and permitting Vietnam to carefully balance on the "tightrope between Washington and Beijing."²⁹ It is also crucial that neither partner inadvertently communicates threats to China through "words, actions, or images" while planning or executing security cooperation engagements.³⁰ Ultimately, bilateral training should help set the conditions to strengthen partnerships and alliances throughout the region, while laying the foundations for increased cooperation and sharing of responsibility for regional security.

While each of the five categories outlined in the MOU is critically important to the overall relationship and trust building between the United States and Vietnam, detailed

²⁹ Manyin, "U.S.-Vietnam Relations in 2013: Current Issues and Implications for U.S. Policy," summary page (unnumbered).

³⁰ Locklear, USPACOM Strategy, 2013.

explorations of each would exceed the scope of this paper. In consideration of both countries' interests in the bilateral relationship, USPACOM should focus primarily on training with the Vietnamese in maritime security operations (MSO), search and rescue (SAR), and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations. These three categories are particularly important, and relevant to USPACOM, for several reasons.

First, all three categories will permit rapid interoperability and, by exercising critical functions (command and control, maneuver, logistics and sustainment, protection, etc.), will enhance fundamental skills and capabilities that can be applied across the range of military operations. Even modest, incremental success in each will have high payoff should an event (such as a natural or man-made disaster, encroachment on sovereignty, or armed conflict) necessitate an acceleration of the cooperative timeline. Second, all three help build relationships and trust in each others' capabilities, promote predictability of how each partner will apply its capabilities, and foster confidence that each side will effectively operate – both bilaterally and unilaterally – with each other's shared interests in mind. Third, these three areas will permit both countries to take advantage of existing and emerging strengths – with Vietnam's priority of defense modernization towards its navy and with U.S. maritime forces that make up the bulk of USPACOM's expeditionary and security cooperation capability. Next, these categories, in particular, complement the U.S. Navy's guiding strategic documents, *Naval Operating Concept 2010* and *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, as well as with current USPACOM Strategy. Finally, and most importantly, these three categories will contribute most profoundly to regional stability, safety, and security, particularly in the maritime domain, which currently dominates shared security interests. Contributing to regional maritime security, search and rescue, and humanitarian

assistance and disaster relief operations will help protect economic and security interests and will resonate positively with ASEAN members and other regional actors.³¹

Simply put, these three categories will contribute the most towards regional stability and protection of shared interests, while allowing both nations to leverage their respective strengths in the region, and are least likely to provoke China because these skills are also aligned with China's interests.

Recognizing that Vietnam has expanded its bilateral cooperation with multiple nations in its pursuit of comprehensive security, the U.S. should carefully consider how to influence Vietnam's military capacity building beyond the current MOU. To achieve this, the U.S. will need to rely on the relationships it maintains in the region and on the global setting.

Other Regional Partners – Vietnamese: In addition to increasing cooperation with the U.S., the Vietnamese have also increased their bilateral cooperation with Russia, India, and even China. These relationships are currently healthy and productive, and the U.S. should encourage the Vietnamese to continue to work with each in the interest of collective security, balance of power, and Vietnam's approach to comprehensive security. While the United States maintains strategic relationships with each of those major powers as well, there are many more countries within the Asia-Pacific region with which the United States maintains very close alliances.

Those very close alliances present a method for the U.S. to continue to assist the Vietnamese navy, and military writ large, by, with, and through other regional partners. Ideally, additive non-U.S. bilateral training events would be conducted by our regional

³¹ Jordan, Stern, and Lohman, "U.S.-Vietnam Defense Relations: Investing in Strategic Alignment," 5.

partners and allies, such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines, all of whom have significant interests in the South China Sea and economic ties to Vietnam, and therefore maintain clear incentive in bilateral relationships with Vietnam. Each of these countries could reasonably be encouraged to engage with Vietnam using models the U.S. shares during bilateral and multilateral exchanges with each of them. In effect, the United States assists and encourages trusted partners within the region to responsibly share knowledge and capabilities that are outside the scope of the standing MOU or are currently too sensitive or pressurized for direct U.S. – Vietnamese interaction.

While increased security cooperation between the U.S. and Vietnam within the five MOU categories is a clear step in the right direction and will provide foundational skills that can be applied across the range of military operations, they will clearly not fully integrate those capabilities and produce seamless interoperability between the two nations' forces. Areas of interest might include air interception in the maritime domain, submarine and anti-submarine warfare skills, and lethal skills in support of collective maritime security. Essentially, the United States would encourage regional friends to do what the Americans presently cannot, politically or diplomatically. Of course there is inherent risk in this approach. However, it's a calculated risk that can be mitigated through careful selection and preparation of the partner training forces, transparent and clear strategic communications by all involved, and a reliance on the linkages that make conflict disadvantageous for all parties.

Beyond accelerating Vietnam's security development in line with U.S. interests, assisting allies and partners to bilaterally contribute to the development of Vietnamese security forces will strengthen the overall security architecture and stability of the Asia-Pacific region. It will also help to acutely strengthen ties between Vietnam and those

supporting nations, aiding Vietnam in its desire to proactively move towards improved relationships with neighbors and regional actors, and contributing to a peaceful, stable, and cooperative Southeast Asia.

Conclusions

Since opening diplomatic relations with Vietnam nearly twenty years ago, the Vietnamese have continued to strengthen its cooperation with the United States in conjunction with its comprehensive security approach. During that same period, the United States' influence within the region has also grown through strong relationship building initiatives and a persistent presence to protect national and shared interests. As the United States continues to negotiate the challenging and complex landscape of increased security cooperation with an emerging Vietnam, it is clear that measured steps will continue to define that expanding relationship. It is also clear that USPACOM will play a decisive role in building trust and strengthening the United States' relationship with Vietnam. With that in mind, the keys to USPACOM success in engaging with Vietnam are leveraging the strong relationships with regional partners and alliances within organizations such as ASEAN, expanding Vietnam's participation in multinational regional security cooperation exercises, and increasing direct and indirect bilateral training with the Vietnamese to build their security cooperation capacity. Weighting U.S. effort in these three categories will have the greatest effects towards building Vietnamese capacity while preserving the power balance and enhancing stability in the region, and will contribute most to achieving and protecting shared interests while countering shared threats.

Recommendations

As this paper has shown, the Vietnamese have developed a complex strategy for comprehensive security. Engagement efforts must be balanced against Vietnamese economic growth and stability, the relationships Vietnam maintains in its complex foreign policy, and the ever-present Vietnamese concern of maintaining a close relationship with China, while simultaneously leveraging the United States and other regional actors as counterbalances to growing Chinese influence. The following recommendations are provided to assist USPACOM planners in developing and implementing an engagement plan for increased security cooperation with Vietnam.

- USPACOM should ensure that multinational exercise planning conference attendees understand ASEAN related issues among participating nations. Whenever possible, exercise design should seek to link key partners to work through issues and bolster positions. At the strategic level, coordinate multinational engagement with partners in combined and complementary ways to influence Vietnamese relations.
- Encourage Vietnam to participate in exercises *Balikatan*, *Cobra Gold*, and *RIMPAC* as soon as possible. Specific goals should be including Vietnam in *Balikatan 2015* or *Cobra Gold 2015*, and *RIMPAC 2016*. These exercises are crucial because they afford training opportunities that are consistent with the 2011 MOU. Additionally, these exercise routinely host multiple ASEAN members and in some cases, fellow South China Sea claimants.
- Schedule and execute comprehensive bilateral training with a focus on maritime security, search and rescue, and HADR operations.

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