

## Helping Hanoi Keep the Dragon at Bay in the South China Sea

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## **Abstract**

The re-emergence of long-term strategic competition with China encourages United States Indo-Pacific Command's (USINDOPACOM) efforts to consider new competition mechanisms to help Hanoi keep the dragon at bay in the South China Sea. The US Department of Homeland Security should further leverage Coast Guard capabilities to assist Hanoi's Maritime Domain Security development and counter Chinese coercive interference in the Vietnam Exclusive Economic Zone. This initiative can be accomplished through a layered man, equip, and train approach consisting of increasing Coast Guard bilateral professional military education, U.S. foreign military sales or financing, and bilateral security cooperation training. Perhaps, one day the US will be able to work more directly with the Vietnamese Navy without the risk of escalating South China Sea tensions, but for now, the Vietnamese Coast Guard approach will help Hanoi and frustrate Beijing.

The re-emergence of long-term strategic competition with China is cause for US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) to consider new competition mechanisms to counter regional maritime challenges. The Department of Homeland Security should leverage Coast Guard capabilities to assist Hanoi's Maritime Domain Security development in the South China Sea to help counter Chinese coercive interference in the Vietnam Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).<sup>1</sup> Accomplishing such a policy will include increasing Coast Guard bilateral professional military education, U.S. foreign military sales and financing, and security cooperation training. This strategy has historical precedence and firmly nests within strategic guidance from both the United States and Vietnam.

### **The Prize: The South China Sea**

China's aggressive behavior in the South China Sea threatens the rule-of-law and freedom-of-the-seas. The United States maintains the position that disputes between sovereign countries should "be resolved peacefully, without coercion, intimidation, threats, or the use of force, and in a manner consistent with international law."<sup>2</sup> The National Security Strategy describes the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a cornerstone in maintaining a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific."<sup>3</sup> Vietnam is scheduled to assume ASEAN Chairmanship in Jan 2020.<sup>4</sup> The US National Defense Strategy spotlights China's "predatory economics" and militarization of the South China Sea to intimidate nations such as Vietnam; this conflicts with

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<sup>1</sup> A 2016 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) arbitrational panel ruled that waters extending up to 200 nautical miles from a country's land territory are considered that country's EEZ.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Congressional Research Service. U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress. Updated Sep 24, 2019. 11, <https://search.proquest.com/congressional/view/app-gis/congresearch/crs-2019-crs-1910011>.

<sup>3</sup> United States, National Security Strategy of the United States of America. Dec 2017. President of the United States, 46.

<sup>4</sup> Nhan Dan, "Vietnam Will Perform Well as ASEAN Chair 2020: ASEAN Secretary General," Nhan Dan Online, last modified Aug 9, 2019, accessed Sep 30, 2019, <https://en.nhandan.org.vn/world/item/7785002-vietnam-will-perform-well-as-asean-chair-2020-asean-secretary-general.html>.

Washington's key defense objectives of “defending allies from military aggression, bolstering partners against coercion, and fairly sharing responsibilities for common defense.”<sup>5</sup> National Security professionals commonly refer to this type of intimidation campaign as ‘coercive interference.’<sup>6</sup>

The South China Sea holds substantial strategic value for the United States for multiple political, economic, and security purposes. Politically, Washington’s regional partners such as Taiwan, Singapore, Indonesia, and Vietnam border portions on this Sea. Manila is an American ally and a significant stakeholder in the region. The South China Sea facilitates an estimated annual \$3.4 trillion worth of trade through its waters which connect the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf with the Western Pacific; this amounts to 14% of US, 42% of Japan, and 64% of China’s maritime trade<sup>7</sup>. Expert assessments project somewhere between \$5-60 trillion of hydrocarbon reserves remain below the seabed in the South China Sea which could involve joint Vietnamese-US business ventures and have an impact on world oil prices.<sup>8</sup> The South China Sea’s contested fishing grounds represent a valuable food resource and food security challenge for regional populations.<sup>9</sup> According to the director of U.S. Center for Strategic and International Studies' Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, the South China Sea holds 12% of

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America (Summary): Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*. (Washington, DC 2018), 4.

<sup>6</sup> "U.S. Accuses China of ‘Coercive Interference’ Off Vietnam," *The Maritime Executive*, last modified Aug 26, 2019, accessed Aug 27, 2019, <https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/u-s-accuses-china-of-coercive-interference-off-vietnam>.

<sup>7</sup> "How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?" *ChinaPower Project*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, last modified Aug 2, 2019, accessed Sep 27, 2019, <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>8</sup> Askari, Muhammad Usman, "China's Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea: A Prologue from Past to Present," *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* 56, no. 1 (06, 2019): 101. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Stavridis, James G. and Johan Bergen, "Opinion | the Fishing Wars are Coming," *Washington Post*, (Sep 13, 2017), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-fishing-wars-are-coming/2017/09/13/05c75208-97c6-11e7-b569-3360011663b4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-fishing-wars-are-coming/2017/09/13/05c75208-97c6-11e7-b569-3360011663b4_story.html).

the world's fisheries that, "now are on the verge of collapse" due to overfishing.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the US Military depends on the South China Sea for access to fulfill its defense and security obligations with Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea.<sup>11</sup> The US welcomes the growing security and economic partnership with Vietnam and the mutual need to strengthen cooperative maritime partnerships in the South China Sea.<sup>12</sup>

### **China's Bullying Approach**

China aims to control the South China Sea. Beijing bases this ambition on Chinese analysis of historical maps that they feel "proves" beyond dispute a nine-dashed line that defines and overlays the boundary of "China's territorial sea" upon the South China Sea.<sup>13</sup> The Chinese proclaimed nine-dash line was determined unjustified by a tribunal ruling in 2016 as a part of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), though Beijing openly disputes the UN determination.<sup>14</sup> Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin articulated China's rejection of the UN position in an official briefing following the arbitral panel where he referred to the UN ruling as "nothing more than a piece of waste paper" that "will not be enforced by anyone."<sup>15</sup> UNCLOS also made EEZs international law and described them as waters extending up to 200 nautical miles from a country's land territory.<sup>16</sup> In an Aug 2019 Beijing press conference

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<sup>10</sup> Christopher Bodeen, "Looming Collapse of Fisheries in the South China Sea?" Accessed Mar 10, 2020.

<https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2019/05/20/looming-collapse-of-fisheries-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America (Summary)*, 2. These examples explain why South China Sea is an arena in which "our network of alliances and partnerships remain the backbone of global security."

<sup>12</sup> United States, National Security Strategy, 46-47.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Congressional Research Service. *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, 66.

<sup>14</sup> Huong Le Thu, "Vietnam's Persistent Foreign Policy Dilemma: Caught between Self-Reliance and Proactive Integration," *Asia Policy* 13, no. 4 (2018): 123-144.

<https://search.proquest.com/docview/2131143418?accountid=322>.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas E. Kellogg, "The South China Sea Ruling: China's International Law Dilemma," *The Diplomat*, last modified Jul 14 2019, accessed Oct 13, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/the-south-china-sea-ruling-chinas-international-law-dilemma/>.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Congressional Research Service. *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, 4.

addressing Hanoi's concern over a Chinese Hydrocarbon Survey Ship operating in the Vietnam EEZ, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman countered Hanoi's concern and stated the ship was "operating in waters under the jurisdiction of [China] and that Vietnam should "respect that" fact.<sup>17</sup> The Chinese self-proclaimed 'nine-dash line' is in palpable conflict with the UNCLOS recognized 200-mile EEZ of Vietnam which is a tension that this paper is attempting to resolve.

Through skillful study and application of the "Three Warfares" (Psychological, Media, and Legal Warfare), China has attempted to manipulate international law to influence perceptions and decision making to achieve its ultimate objectives below the threshold of war.<sup>18</sup> Since 2003, the Chinese Central Military Commission has openly endorsed the concept of "Three Warfares" as a key non-kinetic component of its warfighting doctrine.<sup>19</sup> Beijing continues to refresh the narrative that it has historical claims on the South China Sea and proceeds to publish this message through multiple media venues such as the Chinese Society of International Law's "Critical Study." While lawyers outside of China do not typically accept the findings of studies like these, such methods have met Beijing's desired economic and political objectives by satisfying foreign partners who benefit from China's coercive measures in the South China Sea.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> "Hanoi Confirms Return of Chinese Survey Ship to Vietnamese Waters, Demands Withdrawal," Federal Information & News Dispatch, Inc, Aug 22, 2019, <https://searchproquestcom.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/docview/2278229613/3FE198A750A347E0PQ/1?accountid=322>.

<sup>18</sup> Richard M. Crowell, "War in the Information Age: A Primer for Information Operations and Cyberspace Operations in 21st Century Warfare," Report, RI: U.S. Naval War College, Joint Military Operations Department, Jan 2019, 31.

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2008, p. 19 (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, Mar. 2008); Central Military Commission, People's Liberation Army of China Regulation of Political Work, Article 14(18) (Dec 2003) (setting forth the PLA's doctrine of "three warfares": public opinion, psychological, and legal), cited in the Paul A. Stempel, Capt, USAF, Reading Lawfare in Chinese: The Meaning of the Term "Falu Zhan" ("Lawfare") in Chinese Military Literature (July 2011) (unpublished article).

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Congressional Research Service. U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress, 52.

Beijing likely has an appreciation of the US perception that international Coast Guards pose little threat to the US national security apparatus. China grasps America's conceptual separation between the traditional US Navy and Coast Guard roles and posits the US will likewise not hold the Chinese Coast Guard on the same level as the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA-Navy). In recognition of this seam, over the last decade, China has built up the world's largest Coast Guard totaling over 1,275 ships ranging from offshore-platforms to close-water vessels.<sup>21</sup> One such vessel is China's 12,000-ton Coast Guard Cutter 3901, the largest Cutter in the world.<sup>22</sup> Andrew Erickson, a leading expert from the US Naval War College, explains that China uses its Coast Guard and Maritime Militia to coerce Vietnam and its South China Sea neighbors inside their EEZs as well as disrupt US attempts to uphold the regional status quo and the freedom-of-the-seas.<sup>23</sup>

Chinese People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia is another force, below the PLA-Navy level, that is used in pursuit of Beijing's sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. The Maritime Militia is essentially a fishing fleet with armed crews.<sup>24</sup> The US Department of Defense states the Maritime Militia "is the only government-sanctioned maritime militia in the world" and can take its direction from Chinese armed forces as required.<sup>25</sup> Expert Dr. Scott Truver assessed that Beijing's Maritime Militia augmentation of the Chinese Coast Guard has

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<sup>21</sup> "Understanding China's Third Sea Force: The Maritime Militia," Fairbank Center Blog, last modified Sep 8, 2019, accessed Oct 7, 2019, <https://medium.com/fairbank-center/understanding-chinas-third-sea-force-the-maritime-militia-228a2bfbbedd>.

<sup>22</sup> "Beijing's South China Sea Stance is Driving Vietnam into America's Arms," South China Morning Post Website, accessed Oct 12, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3019890/beijings-south-china-sea-stance-driving-vietnam-americas-arms>.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew S. Erickson, "Maritime Numbers Game, Understanding and Responding to China's Three Sea Forces," *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum*, January 28, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Congressional Research Service. U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress, 58.

<sup>25</sup> Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress [on] Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2018*, p. 71.

successfully advanced “China’s posture in the South China Sea” by providing persistent Chinese presence while also dodging international scrutiny associated with escalating a PLA-Navy “warfighting” presence.<sup>26</sup> This strategy of mass in the South China Sea has enabled their coercive actions to control fishing, hydrocarbon exploration, and establishment of human-made structures within the Vietnam EEZ.<sup>27</sup>

### **Vietnam’s Conundrum**

Vietnam sees its security and prosperity as being dependent on maintaining peaceful relations with the United States and China. At the same time, Hanoi sees Beijing’s theft of Vietnamese resources as a threat to prosperity. Vietnam has a traditional defense policy referred to as the “Three Nos”—more specifically, “no military alliances, no aligning with one country against another, and no foreign military bases on Vietnamese soil.”<sup>28</sup> First appearing in 1998 and mentioned more recently in Hanoi’s new Law on National Defense, the “Three Nos” policy leans more towards defensive engagements and away from actions that risk an offensive perception from the international audience.<sup>29</sup> Hanoi recognizes US attempts to maintain freedom-of-navigation in the South China Sea but continues to be challenged by Beijing’s growing presence and coercive interference in Vietnam’s EEZ.<sup>30</sup> In May of 2014, the tension between China and Vietnam grew following a skirmish involving a Chinese oil rig that Hanoi

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<sup>26</sup> Scott Truver, "A Not-so-Simple PLAN?" *Proceedings* 145 no. 8/1,398 (August 2019): 3. <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2019/august/not-so-simple-plan>.

<sup>27</sup> Le Thu Huong, "China’s Incursion into Vietnam’s EEZ and Lessons from the Past," *The Maritime Executive*, last modified Aug 20, 2019, accessed Oct 6, 2019, <https://search-proquest-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/docview/2296652807?accountid=322>.

<sup>28</sup> Derek Grossman and Dung Huynh, "Vietnam’s Defense Policy of ‘No’ Quietly Saves Room for ‘Yes’," *The Diplomat*, last modified Jan 2019, accessed Aug 30, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/vietnams-defense-policy-of-no-quietly-saves-room-for-yes/>.

<sup>29</sup> Derek Grossman and Dung Huynh, "Vietnam’s Defense Policy of ‘No’ Quietly Saves Room for ‘Yes’."

<sup>30</sup> "U.S. Accuses China of ‘Coercive Interference’ Off Vietnam," *The Maritime Executive*. last modified Aug 26, 2019, accessed Aug 27, 2019, <https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/u-s-accuses-china-of-coercive-interference-off-vietnam>.

argued was illegally drilling in its's EEZ.<sup>31</sup> Hanoi considered the Aug 2019 return of a Chinese Hydrocarbon Survey ship as a “serious violation” of sovereignty and demanded it depart the Vietnam EEZ.<sup>32</sup>

Hanoi seems to be moving slightly away from its traditionally non-aligned policy. In June 2015, Vietnam and the US co-signed a Vision Statement that reaffirmed common concerns between the US and Vietnam regarding the South China Sea and both countries' desires to enhance security in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>33</sup> Both countries want to strengthen their defensive capabilities in the region “to enhance cooperation, promote security, and address non-traditional security threats.”<sup>34</sup> However, both countries also remain sensitive to the fact that it has only been approximately 25 years since the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the US normalized relations and that “legacy-of-war issues,” while improving, still linger.<sup>35</sup> It is in the US's best interest to build strategic cooperation with Vietnam to provide global leadership and avoid provoking conflict in the South China Sea. Standing up to Chinese coercion is a delicate but near-term problem for Hanoi as Vietnam prepares for its 2020 ASEAN chairmanship, its stint on the UN Security Council, and its 13th Party Congress that may direct changes in 2021.<sup>36</sup>

### **The US Coast Guard to Vietnam's Rescue**

Using the US Coast Guard to build Vietnam's capacity to resist Chinese incursions is the perfect response to Hanoi's conundrum. Increasing the capabilities and capacities of the

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<sup>31</sup> Le Thu Huong, "China's Incursion into Vietnam's EEZ and Lessons from the Past"

<sup>32</sup> “Hanoi Confirms Return of Chinese Survey Ship to Vietnamese Waters, Demands Withdrawal,” Federal Information & News Dispatch.

<sup>33</sup> “United States and Vietnam Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations,” Jul 7, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/07/united-states-%E2%80%93-vietnam-joint-vision-statement>.

<sup>34</sup> “United States and Vietnam Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations,” Jul 7, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*. (Washington, DC. Jun 1, 2019), 37.

<sup>36</sup> Le Thu Huong, "China's Incursion into Vietnam's EEZ and Lessons from the Past"

Vietnamese Coast Guard (VCG) represents a subtle yet effective approach. The Coast Guard's specialized functions nest well into what some have described as the "no military alliances" loophole in Hanoi's "Three Nos" defense policy.<sup>37</sup> The US Department of Homeland Security's Coast Guard missions of Port and Waterway Security, Search and Rescue, and Law Enforcement are non-threatening and not seen as conflicting with Vietnam's defense policy. Coast Guards traditionally enforce the protection of their country's EEZs, including the oversight of natural resources such as fisheries and hydrocarbons, while Navies' responsibilities typically rest outside the EEZs with their primary focus being the protection of regional commercial shipping.<sup>38</sup> Using this rationale, US assistance in strengthening the VCG should be tolerable under the Hanoi's existing policy and seen as mutually beneficial.

The VCG, while growing, lacks the capacity to secure its own EEZ. In 2013 Hanoi reorganized its littoral forces into today's VCG and invested in their capabilities as a non-escalatory attempt to address continued Chinese incursions in the South China Sea.<sup>39</sup> The VCG headquarters is in Hanoi with four Regional Commands located in Hai Phong, Quang Nam, Vung Tau and Ca Mau respectively; their total vessel inventory is approximately 69 ships largely comprised of: (1) 115m US Hamilton Class Endurance Cutter, (8) 90m Damen DN 2000 Offshore Patrol Vessels (1) 80.5m South Korean Cutter, (9) 54m TT400 Patrol Vessels, (2) 48m Haeuri Class Patrol Vessels, (18) 13.7m Metal Shark Defiant 45 Class fast patrol vessels, and (1) 90m off-shore Supply tanker with the majority of the remaining fleet made up of smaller inshore

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<sup>37</sup> Derek Grossman and Dung Huynh, "Vietnam's Defense Policy of 'No' Quietly Saves Room for 'Yes'."

<sup>38</sup> Vego, Milan N., "On Naval Power," *Joint Force Quarterly* 50 (2008): 9-10.

<sup>39</sup> "Vietnam, Navy, Organization, Vietnam, Coast Guard," Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment-Southeast Asia, last modified May 23, 2019, accessed Oct 13, 2019, [https://janes-ihs-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/SouthEastAsia/Display/FG\\_2312394-SEA#](https://janes-ihs-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/SouthEastAsia/Display/FG_2312394-SEA#)

patrol and search-and-rescue vessels.<sup>40</sup> The VCG's air component is made up of (3) C212-400 fixed-wing transport aircraft equipped with a Swedish Maritime Surveillance System 6000.<sup>41</sup> A time, space, and force comparison between the Chinese Coast Guard and Maritime Militia, against the relatively small in comparison VCG, illustrates the deficit Hanoi is facing in the South China Sea. However, simply providing Hanoi more Coast Guard equipment will not adequately solve the problem.

### **Educating Vietnam's Coast Guard**

Increasing bilateral Coast Guard professional military education will grow interoperability and a shared understanding of how to best employ Coast Guard capabilities. The US and Vietnam's 2015 Joint Vision Statement highlights the desire to "expand training and education opportunities of each country's military academic institutions"<sup>42</sup> The US National Defense Strategy also specifically recognizes professional military education as a "strategic asset" to grow "trust and interoperability" with allied and partner forces.<sup>43</sup> Bilateral professional military education opportunities have great potential to establish the foundation for increased interoperability between the US and Vietnam.

The United States Coast Guard Academy is exceptionally qualified to prepare VCG Officers to confront the complex issues of the South China Sea. US Congress allocates the Coast Guard Academy 36 positions for its International Cadet Program.<sup>44</sup> International Cadets graduate at an approximate 76% success rate, which is only slightly behind the success rate of

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<sup>40</sup> "Vietnam," Jane's Fighting Ships, last modified Sep 9, 2019, accessed Oct 13, 2019, <https://janes-ihs-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/FightingShips/>.

<sup>41</sup> Vietnam," Jane's Fighting Ships.

<sup>42</sup> "United States and Vietnam Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations," Jul 7, 2015. .

<sup>43</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, National Defense Strategy of the United States of America (Summary), 8.

<sup>44</sup> "International Cadets at the Coast Guard Academy," U.S. Coast Guard Academy, accessed Sep 27, 2019, <https://www.uscga.edu/international-cadets/>.

US Cadets.<sup>45</sup> According to the US Coast Guard Academy Admissions Office, “Since 1980, about 130 graduates from 40 nations have entered into military or governmental service after graduating from the Academy.”<sup>46</sup> The Class of 2023 currently has international cadets from Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Mauritius, the Philippines, and Rwanda.<sup>47</sup> International cadets are fully integrated into the Academy, follow the same rules, and paid the same as US cadets (\$975 / month); successful graduation also earns international Cadets a Bachelor of Science degree.<sup>48</sup> The international parent countries agree to commit their Cadets to serve in their own country for at least five years following successful completion of the four-year program.<sup>49</sup> While Vietnam has yet to participate in the International Cadet Program, ASEAN nations such as the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia have already joined this bilateral opportunity.<sup>50</sup> This ASEAN participation suggests that expansion of this program to include Vietnam is well within reason.

The International Cadet admission process into the Coast Guard Academy is similar to US candidates with some additional caveats. The Academy will work through the US Embassy’s Office of Defense Attaché in Hanoi to facilitate the identification, interview, and enrollment process for prospective International Cadets.<sup>51</sup> Vietnamese Cadets will be required to meet minimum threshold requirements for the Scholastic Achievement Test, Test of English as a

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<sup>45</sup> LT Brennan Dougherty, International Cadet Coordinator, U.S. Coast Guard Academy, email to author, Oct 15, 2019.

<sup>46</sup> "International Graduates," U.S. Coast Guard Academy, accessed Sep 27, 2019, <https://www.uscga.edu/international-graduates/>.

<sup>47</sup> "Coast Guard Bears," U.S. Coast Guard Academy Sports, accessed Sep 27, 2019, <http://www.uscgasports.com/general/2018-19/releases/20190625je3qwg>.

<sup>48</sup> U.S. Coast Guard Academy, "International Cadets at the Coast Guard Academy."

<sup>49</sup> U.S. Coast Guard Academy, "International Cadets at the Coast Guard Academy."

<sup>50</sup> U.S. Coast Guard Academy, "International Graduates."

<sup>51</sup> "Admission and Tuition," U.S. Coast Guard Academy, accessed Sep 27, 2019, <https://www.uscga.edu/admission-and-tuition/>

Foreign Language and English Comprehension Level exams.<sup>52</sup> Tuition, room and board costs will be the responsibility of Vietnam with a fee of \$24,000 per year, a discounted rate given to World Bank members, plus travel expenses and a one-time deposit of \$3,000 to cover the cost of issued items such as a computer or tablet and uniforms.<sup>53</sup>

The bi-lateral return on investment for the professional military education exchange with the US Coast Guard Academy is beneficial for both the US and Vietnam. The diversity of perspectives in and out of the classroom exploring issues ranging from protection of ocean resources, terrorism, transnational crime, large-scale human migration, disaster response, and recovery have great potential to build combined momentum in the South China Sea through continued relationships after graduation.<sup>54</sup> This expanded world view is likely to help the Vietnamese Coast Guard Officers confront the delicate situation with China while securing their EEZ.

The US Coast Guard can also expand ongoing PME exchanges on scales of lesser duration. Bilateral Subject Matter Expert Exchanges can continue to build relationships while assessing compliance with the International Maritime Organization; the US Coast Guard International Port Security Program works directly with the Vietnam Maritime Administration to review International Ship and Port Security codes in Vietnam and the United States<sup>55</sup> Though these types of bilateral educational engagements, partnerships can be expanded to protect Vietnamese and US maritime interests, while enabling secure global maritime trade.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Coast Guard International Affairs and Foreign Policy, *U.S. Coast Guard International Training Handbook. Vol. Edition 16*, Washington, DC. 2018, 45.

<sup>53</sup> U.S. Coast Guard Academy, "Admission and Tuition."

<sup>54</sup> U.S. Coast Guard Academy, "International Cadets at the Coast Guard Academy."

<sup>55</sup> CDR Matthew Frazee, International Port Security Liaison Chief, USCG Far East Activities (FEACT), email, Oct 3, 2019.

<sup>56</sup> U.S. Coast Guard Pacific Area, "FEACT Maritime Security International Port Security Program," U.S. Coast Guard FEACT, accessed Sep 24, 2019, <https://www.pacificarea.uscg.mil/Our-Organization/District-14/D14-Units/Activities-Far-East-FEACT/FEACT-Maritime-Security/>.

Expanding US-based professional military education for VCG Officers should not stop at the entry-level. Since 1956, between the US Naval Command College and the US Naval Staff College, the US Naval War College has educated more than 2,100 officers from 91 nations, including more than 136 foreign chiefs of service.<sup>57</sup> Vietnam currently has a military officer attending the US Naval War College, and extending the program to the VCG is within reason. Actively recruiting qualified VCG Officers to attend these US Naval Warfare College International programs will further expand the benefits gained at the US Coast Guard Academy and continue to strengthen international maritime partnerships.

### **Getting the Vietnamese the Tools for the Job**

Vietnam requires additional Coast Guard assets to counter the Chinese massed maritime presence in the South China Sea. The US National Defense Strategy calls to “deepen interoperability” with combined forces, in consultation with Congress and the Department of State, and “prioritize requests for military equipment sales, accelerating foreign partner modernization and ability to integrate with US forces.”<sup>58</sup> Hanoi continues to show desires to modernize its naval forces to muddle the efforts of potential adversaries in Vietnam’s maritime littoral.<sup>59</sup> According to S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies’ Southeast Asia research fellow Collin Koh Swee Lean, Vietnam is frustrated with Russian arms sales policies and becoming leery of continued dependence on Moscow as its foreign source for military sales due to rising tensions between Vietnam and China.<sup>60</sup> In Feb 2018, the US Principal Deputy Assistant

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<sup>57</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Department of the Navy, “U.S. Naval War College International Students,” accessed Oct 12, 2019, <https://usnwc.edu/Student-Information/Resident-Students-Domestic-and-International/International-Students>.

<sup>58</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, National Defense Strategy of the United States of America (Summary), 9.

<sup>59</sup> The Military Balance, “Chapter Six: Asia,” The Military Balance, 119 (2019): 222-319, <https://doi-org.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/04597222.2018.1561032>, 314.

<sup>60</sup> Valerie Insinna, “US Looks to Increase Weapons Exports to Vietnam, Decrease Russian Influence,” Defense News Website, modified Feb 7, 2018, accessed Oct 13, 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/singapore-airshow/2018/02/07/us-looks-to-increase-weapons-exports-to-vietnam-decrease-russian-influence/>.

Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs stated that the relationship with Vietnam is trending positive along with US desires to increase the number of Vietnamese defense contracts.<sup>61</sup> The US should continue to capitalize on this momentum to further enable the VCG's capabilities and capacities.

VCG continued growth can be stimulated with with money. In May 2016, the US completely removed the "ban on the sale of lethal weapons to Vietnam."<sup>62</sup> While Vietnam is supportive of the US lifting the restriction on Foreign Military Sales to Vietnam, they remain fiscally constrained in the ability to purchase high dollar military equipment from the US Washington recognized this fact and budgeted maritime security assistance to Vietnam through the Foreign Assistance Act.<sup>63</sup> The US Foreign Military Financing program has grown in recent years from \$500,000 in 2009 to \$9 Million in 2013 and \$26.7 Million in 2017.<sup>64</sup> Hanoi put this US money to good use by improving the VCG equipment set. This equipment may seed future buys of more US equipment as Hanoi shifts the VCG from a Russian to a US interoperable suite.

On 25 May 2017, the US transferred the Coast Guard Hamilton Class Cutter Morgenthau to the VCG through the Excess Defense Article program marking the first major defense item transfer since the lift of the embargo.<sup>65</sup> This 115m vessel, renamed CSB8020, is currently the largest ship in Vietnam's military inventory, has a top speed of 29 knots and is armed with a 76mm naval gun.<sup>66</sup> After receiving training from US Coast Guardsman in Hawaii, Vietnam has been actively employing this key asset in the South China Sea. According to Vice Admiral

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<sup>61</sup> Valerie Insinna, "US Looks to Increase Weapons Exports to Vietnam, Decrease Russian Influence."

<sup>62</sup> RRT News, "US Fully Lifts Ban on Lethal Weapons Sales to Vietnam," RTTNews, May 23, 2016.

<sup>63</sup> Insinna, Valerie. "US Looks to Increase Weapons Exports to Vietnam, Decrease Russian Influence."

<sup>64</sup> Jon Grevatt, "Vietnam Takes Delivery of More US patrol boats," Jane's Defence Industry. 2019;36(5).

<sup>65</sup> Sam LaGrone, "Former U.S. Cutter Morgenthau Transferred to Vietnamese Coast Guard," USNI News, last modified May 26, 2019, accessed Oct 5, 2019, <https://news.usni.org/2017/05/26/former-u-s-cutter-morgenthau-transferred-vietnamese-coast-guard>.

<sup>66</sup> "Vietnam," Jane's Fighting Ships.

Linda Fagan, Commander of the US Coast Guard's Pacific Area, discussions between Washington and Hanoi regarding the transfer of a second Hamilton Class Cutter, while not complete, have been positive.<sup>67</sup>

Similarly, the US transferred a total of eighteen 13.7m Defiant 45 Class Metal Shark Patrol Boats to the VCG<sup>68</sup> The final scheduled wave of six patrol boats should deliver in early 2020, and the VCG has requested an additional twenty patrol boats.<sup>69</sup> These Louisiana built aluminum-hulled vessels are top-of-the-line in the Metal Shark Defiant Class; they are designed for law enforcement, port security, and military missions and are well suited for countering the Chinese Maritime Militia and illegal fishing activities in the Vietnam EEZ.<sup>70</sup>

Finally, US FMF funding of \$10.25 million has been provided through Foreign Military Financing to assist the VCG with a Scan Eagle Unmanned Aerial System capability to further enable their maritime domain awareness.<sup>71</sup> The Boeing subsidiary contract is expected to execute in March 2022 and will provide the VCG multiple platforms capable of loitering up to 20 hours at an altitude of 15,000 feet, depending on the Scan Eagles' configuration.<sup>72</sup> This capability will not only improve Vietnamese maritime domain security but will specifically

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<sup>67</sup> Khanh Lynh, "US Coast Guard Promises Long-Term, Tight Cooperation with Vietnam," VnExpress International, last modified Jun 11, 2019, accessed Oct 13, 2019, <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/us-coast-guard-promises-long-term-tight-cooperation-with-vietnam-3936947.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Grevatt J. Vietnam takes delivery of more US patrol boats. *Jane's Defence Industry*. 2019;36(5).

<sup>69</sup> Linden Dahlkemper, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Maritime Programs Office, Office of Defense Cooperation, U.S. Embassy Hanoi, Vietnam Maritime Security Working Group Brief, Hanoi, Vietnam, Sep 27, 2019.

<sup>70</sup> Jane's By IHS Markit, "Jane's Fighting Ships; Metal Shark Defiant 45," Jane's By IHS Markit., last modified Sep 9, accessed Oct 5, 2019,

<sup>71</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, *Fact Sheet – U.S. Security Cooperation with Vietnam*, Washington, D.C., Aug 2018.

<sup>72</sup> Vu Anh, "Vietnam to Buy Six Military Drones from Boeing: US Defense Department," VnExpress International., last modified Jun 3, 2019, accessed Oct 13, 2019, <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnam-to-buy-six-military-drones-from-boeing-us-defense-department-3932760.html>.

provide them with the ability to surveil and to actively counter Chinese “Three Warfare” narratives in the South China Sea.<sup>73</sup>

While maintaining positive progress towards increasing Foreign Military Sales and maintaining Foreign Military Finance support, the US should also support the VCG by providing them obsolete US Coast Guard equipment. The US Coast Guard’s Fiscal Year 2020 President’s budget identifies “\$12 million in savings associated with the planned decommissioning of one High Endurance Cutter and three 110-foot Patrol Boats...[which] are being replaced by new, more capable National Security Cutters and Fast Response Cutters, respectively.”<sup>74</sup> Transferring these vessels scheduled for decommissioning to the VCG will increase foreign capacities while the US Coast Guard simultaneously recapitalizes the fleet.

### **Increasing Coast Guard Security Cooperation Training**

The US should increase training and cooperation events to increase the capabilities of the VCG. According to our National Security Strategy, the US must seek out educational opportunities and “people-to-people exchanges” to establish networks and produce leaders that “will extend a free and prosperous world.”<sup>75</sup> The November 2017 Joint Statement from Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang and US President Trump reaffirmed bilateral “commitment to deepened defense cooperation and shared resolve to address regional security challenges” and “underscored that their two countries would deepen and gradually expand security and intelligence cooperation, enhancing information sharing and joint training on issues of mutual concern.”<sup>76</sup> As said by career national security professional and Center for Strategic

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<sup>73</sup> “Vietnam, Navy, Organization, Vietnam, Coast Guard,” Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment-Southeast Asia.

<sup>74</sup> U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters, President's Fiscal Year 2020 Budget Proposal, Washington, D.C. 2018.

<sup>75</sup> United States, National Security Strategy, 33.

<sup>76</sup> “Joint Statement: Between the United States of America and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam,” opened for signature Nov 13, 2017.

International Studies Senior Associate, Tommy Ross, “the key to a more effective regional military engagement [in the South China Sea] will be a more sophisticated and robust approach to security assistance.”<sup>77</sup> The US should increase bilateral Coast Guard security cooperation and training to maintain and grow its “contact force” relationship with Vietnam and “compete more effectively below the level of armed conflict” as the US National Defense Strategy directs.<sup>78</sup> The US Coast Guard has a history in this field, is participating in bilateral training, and has room to increase in the future.<sup>79</sup>

US and Vietnam maritime security engagements have been trending positive for the last several years. The March 2018 Da Nang port call from USS Carl Vinson historically marked the first US aircraft carrier visit to Vietnam in more than 40 years.<sup>80</sup> Vietnam hosted exercise Pacific Partnership 2018 in Khanh Hoa province, where USNS Brunswick, US Hospital ship the USNS Mercy, and Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force JDS Osumi participated to further elevate multilateral humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) capabilities.<sup>81</sup> In 2018 Vietnam also participated, for the first time, in the “world’s largest multinational maritime exercise, Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC).”<sup>82</sup> These are all good examples that Vietnam is ready for increased engagement.

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<https://vn.usembassy.gov/20171112-joint-statement-united-states-america-socialist-republic-viet-nam/>

<sup>77</sup> Tommy Ross, "Deterrence & Security Assistance: The South China Sea," *Parameters* 47, no. 4 (2017): 63-74.

<https://search-proquest-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/docview/2051199747?accountid=322>.

<sup>78</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, National Defense Strategy of the United States of America (Summary), 7.

<sup>79</sup> William H. Thiesen, “The Long Blue Line: Coast Guard Joined the Fight in Vietnam Over 50 Years Ago.” *Coast Guard Compass*. last modified Jun 21, 2018 accessed Sep 24, 2019.

<https://refworks.proquest.com/library/5d6941dfe4b08d1f63d9a663/?eml=activation>. Of the 56 Coast Guard Cutters that operated in support of US Operations in Vietnam between 1965-1968, 30 were turned over to the South Vietnamese Coast Guard and subsequently trained to operate them by US Coast Guardsmen. Additional bilateral assistance provided by the US Coast Guard in the Vietnam War included Port Security, Waterways Details, and Explosives Loading Detachments (ELDs) as well as installing and servicing aids-to-navigation in South Vietnam.

<sup>80</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Fact Sheet.”

<sup>81</sup> "Vietnam: Pacific Partnership 2018 Kicks Off in Khanh Hoa," MENA Report, May 18, 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/docview/2040986501?accountid=322>.

<sup>82</sup> Wyatt. Olson, "Navy: China Out, Vietnam and Israel in for RIMPAC 2018," TCA Regional News, May 30, 2018. <https://search-proquest-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/docview/2046942927?pq-origsite=summon>.

The US Coast Guard has proven its ability to forward position uniquely qualified combat-ready forces that can also build partnership capacity with the VCG. Patrol Forces Southwest Asia (PATFORSWA) is the most sizable US Coast Guard formation operating outside of the continental United States and supports US Central Command (CENTCOM) with “six 110’ cutters, shoreside support personnel, Advanced Interdiction Teams, a Maritime Engagement Team, and other deployable specialized forces.”<sup>83</sup> PATFORSWA has been operating in CENTCOM since 2002 and has played pivotal roles in maritime security as well as maritime infrastructure protection operations while annually supporting more than 50 exercises and security cooperation events in the CENTCOM area of responsibility.<sup>84</sup> The same, or a similar, capability-set should be replicated in the INDOPACOM area of responsibility to help realize what Washington had previously labeled the United States’ “Pivot to the Pacific” and now describes as the “Return of Great Power Competition.”<sup>85</sup>

### **Summation and Final Thoughts on Aiding Vietnam**

Some might argue that the USCG, as the country's smallest service, cannot manage to defeat the Chinese Navy or completely end Chinese incursions. Such challenges ignore the wider realities. China is engaging in “grey zone” warfare precisely because it is nervous about the legitimacy of its actions. It employs its coast guard because it cannot use its Navy. Likewise, a pure US Navy solution will be perceived as escalatory and “too combative.” In early 2019, Admiral John Richardson, the then US Chief of Naval Operations, cautioned his Chinese counterpart that Chinese coast guard and maritime militia vessels would be treated as

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<sup>83</sup> "Patrol Forces Southwest Asia (PATFORSWA)," U.S. Coast Guard Atlantic Area., accessed Sep 23, 2019, <https://www.atlanticarea.uscg.mil/Our-Organization/Area-Units/PATFORSWA/>.

<sup>84</sup> Connie Terrell, "PATFORSWA: Guardians of the Arabian Gulf." Coast Guard Compass, last modified Aug 22, 2016, accessed Oct 5, 2019. <https://coastguard.dodlive.mil/2016/08/patforswa-guardians-of-the-arabian-gulf/>.

<sup>85</sup> Aaron Mehta, "'Pivot to the Pacific' is Over, Senior U.S. Diplomat Says." Defense News, August 08, 2017. <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2017/03/14/pivot-to-the-pacific-is-over-senior-u-s-diplomat-says/>.

“combatants” if they provoked US Navy warships.<sup>86</sup> This high-order-of-magnitude solution is not yet necessary and must remain in reserve to hedge against further escalation. The Coast Guard’s ‘white hull’ presence will complement the US Navy’s Freedom of Navigation Operations while avoiding the politically dangerous perception of US Gunboat Diplomacy.<sup>87</sup>

Hard decisions are necessary concerning where to assume risk and what theaters take precedence in the “Great Power Competition” described in the National Defense Strategy. Scholar Dr. Andrew Erickson aptly points out that the US and its partners must increase efforts to halt the coercive efforts of China whose focus is to “...impose its national laws and disputed sovereignty claims on features and maritime spaces to which its neighbors and the international community have legitimate rights.”<sup>88</sup> Aiding Vietnam’s coast guard is a low-cost coast way to meet China’s encroachment, and will force China to spend more to counter the threat. Furthermore, such an approach is acceptable to Hanoi. Perhaps, one day, the US will be able to work more directly with the Vietnamese Navy, but for now this is an approach that will frustrate Beijing and help Hanoi.

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<sup>86</sup> Ryan Pickrell, "China's South China Sea Strategy Takes a Hit as the US Navy Threatens to Get Tough on Beijing's Sea Forces," Business Insider, last modified Apr 29 2019, accessed Oct 12, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.in/chinas-south-china-sea-strategy-takes-a-hit-as-the-us-navy-threatens-to-get-tough-on-beijings-sea-forces/articleshow/69101770.cms>.

<sup>87</sup> Ridzwan Rahmat, “Vietnam Receives Hamilton-Class Cutter for US Coast Guard,” Jane's IHS Markit, last modified May 29, 2017, accessed Oct 13, 2019. <https://janes-ihs-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/Janes/Display/jni78118-jni-2017>.

<sup>88</sup> Andrew S. Erickson, “Maritime Numbers Game, Understanding and Responding to China’s Three Sea Forces.”

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