

US-Vietnam Mil-Mil Relations: How to Elevate the Relationship

by

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Abstract

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Since the normalization of relations in 1995, within the military to military arena as well as other diplomatic realms, the U.S. and Vietnam relationship has accomplished much and arguably is at its height. However, despite the vastly improved status, the relationship is nowhere near the strategic partnership level envisioned by senior U.S. officials. Although there are many limiting constraints, the main culprit appears to be lack of trust on both sides. For the U.S., the lack of trust stems from Vietnam's poor human rights record. From the Vietnamese viewpoint, the low level of trust is based on perceived U.S. emphasis on democratization/peaceful evolution as well as the U.S. record as a fair-weather friend. How to overcome these obstacles is the main purpose of this paper. The paper will also examine where the relationship has been, look at where it is now, and recommend how best to elevate the relationship to the desired strategic partnership level proposed by Secretary of State Clinton during her visits to Vietnam in 2010.

US-Vietnam Mil-Mil Relations: How to Elevate the Relationship

Today I am announcing the normalization of diplomatic relationships with Vietnam...We have so much work ahead of us. This moment offers us the opportunity to bind up our wounds. They have resisted time for too long. We can now move on common ground. Whatever divided us before let us consign to the past. Let this moment, in the words of the Scripture, be a time to heal and time to build.

—William J. Clinton, President of the United States, July 11, 1995¹

On June 3, 2012, 17 years after President Clinton announced normalized relations with Vietnam, and fresh on the heels of the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta visited Cam Ranh Bay, once home of the robust U.S. Naval Base during the Vietnam War. The symbolic visit was the first by a serving – or retired – U.S. Cabinet level official to Cam Ranh Bay since the end of the Vietnam War. With the Vietnam People's Navy 3rd Military Region Naval Base as backdrop, Secretary Panetta, stood on the deck of the USNS Richard E. Byrd, in unrelenting equatorial heat, yet looking surprisingly cool as he gazed across the calm lagoon of Cam Ranh Bay, and addressed the mostly civilian crew of the ship:

Today I stand on a U.S. ship in Cam Ranh Bay to recognize the 17th anniversary of the normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam...I am here to take stock on the partnership we are developing with Vietnam...We've come a long way...We want to explore ways that we can to expand the relationship.²

The Secretary's carefully crafted words expressed hope in the relationship and shine a bit of light on the purpose of this paper, which is to examine U.S.-Vietnam military-to-military relations, review where the relationship has been, explore where it is now, and recommend how best to further the relationship to reach the desired “strategic-partnership” level proposed by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton during her 2010 visit to Vietnam.

However, before delving into the issues that impede furthering the relationship, it is useful to look at where the U.S and Vietnam military-to-military relationship has been.

The Under-the-Radar Beginning

After Saigon fell in April 1975, the U. S. was in no hurry to rush back into the mix in Vietnam. The myriad reasons included: negative U.S. public opinion of the Vietnam War and Vietnam's demands for billions in reconstruction aid secretly promised by President Nixon in 1973³, the Government of Vietnam's (GVN) poor human rights record – particularly the North's efforts to “re-educate” its Southern compatriots after the war – and the expulsion of Chinese-Vietnamese from Vietnam, concerns about Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978, and the GVN's military and economic alignment with the Soviet Union.

What slowly brought the U.S. back to Vietnam was Washington's interest in accounting, to the fullest extent possible, for thousands of U.S. service members who remained missing in Vietnam. Leading a then quiet – and at times secretive – diplomatic effort was the National League of POW-MIA Families of American Prisoners and Missing in South East Asia. Spearheading the under-the radar project was Ms. Ann Mills-Griffith, the tenacious founder-and-still-serving Chairman of the League of Families, whose brother, an Air Force pilot, was – and still is – missing from the war. Ms. Mills-Griffith was joined by then National Security Council (NSC) Military Advisor, COL (ret) Dick Childress, and other key members of the league.⁴

The accountability effort, which received support and attention from the National Security Council (NSC) and President Reagan, bore fruit but was somewhat divisive. Vietnam's responses to the U.S. queries on “Last-Known-Alive” cases and the GVN's less than forth-coming actions concerning the warehousing of U.S. remains, and other

areas within the POW/MIA accountability realm, hardened the already polarized U.S. sentiment on Vietnam and created barriers to further interaction.⁵

However, by 1985, without much public fanfare, the Joint Casualty Resolution Center (JCRC) – predecessor to the present Joint Prisoner of War Missing in Action Command (JPAC) conducted an initial search for remains of U.S. airmen at a B52 crash-site near Hanoi.⁶ The MIA accountability effort received an additional boost in 1987 with a visit to Vietnam by General John Vessey, President Reagan's Special Emissary for POW-MIA Issues and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The visit resulted in the first joint recovery operation between Joint Task Force Designated Full Accounting (JTF-FA) and its counterpart, the Vietnam Office for the Seeking of Missing Persons (VNOSMP) in 1988.

The Decisive Years

Vietnam's decision to pull out of Cambodia in 1989 and its support for a compromise peace settlement under United Nations' sponsorship – along with the GVN's commitment to continue assisting the United States to account for its MIAs – encouraged the George H.W. Bush Administration to push for improved relations. By April 1991, the United States presented Vietnam with a four-phased process towards normalization.⁷ By the end of that year, Vietnam authorized the establishment of JPAC Detachment 2, a permanent MIA Office in Hanoi.⁸

President Clinton continued to build on the thaw and in 1993 signaled an end to U.S. opposition to Vietnam receiving international financial assistance. Against conventional wisdom, and despite criticisms that Vietnam was not doing enough on the MIA accountability and human rights fronts, President Clinton pushed ahead to normalize relations, announcing the end of the U.S. trade embargo on Vietnam in

February 1994. Two months later, with support from prominent Vietnam War veterans such as Senator John McCain and Senator John Kerry, Congress passed the Foreign Relations Authorization Act supporting normalizing relations with Vietnam.⁹

On January 1, 1995 Vietnam opened a Liaison Office in Washington; two days later, the United States opened a Liaison Office in Hanoi. On 11 July 1995 President Clinton announced normalization of relations with Vietnam, followed a day later by Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet's announcement that the GVN's would normalize relations with the United States. On August 6, 1995 the United States and Vietnam raised their national flags and opened their respective Embassies in Hanoi and Washington.¹⁰

The Cautious Years

Despite Presidential and general Congressional support, it took the U.S. Senate almost two years to confirm Douglas "Pete" Peterson, Vietnam War veteran and former POW, as the first post-war U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam. Ambassador Petersen was confirmed on April 10 and assumed his post in Hanoi on May 9, 1997.¹¹ Military-to-military engagement took on similar cautionary characteristics – not only on the U.S. but also on the Vietnamese side. As recalled by Dr. Lewis M. Stern, who has been involved in the U.S.-Vietnam military-to-military relationship for the past two decades, and worked in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) at the early stages of normalization, the U.S. wanted to be deliberate in its effort to build trust and mutual understanding with the Vietnamese Ministry of National Defense (MND). OSD offered the MND a number of basic proposals for low-level military engagements.

According to Dr. Stern, besides continued cooperation in the MIA accountability arena, other military-to-military engagements were to modestly focus on military

medicine, demining, military and scientific technological cooperation, and disaster relief/humanitarian projects.¹²

Most of the accomplishments, thus, were restricted to high-level visits. The first was in November 1996, an introductory visit to Hanoi by the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Affairs. This visit was followed in February 1997 by Admiral Thomas Fargo, Commander of U.S. Pacific Command, visiting Hanoi. In October 1998, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam visited the Pentagon. In the same month, Deputy Defense Minister Tran Hanh visited the Pentagon.¹³

The Auspicious-Yet-Conflicting Years

The beginning of the new millennium began auspiciously in March 2000 with a visit to Vietnam by Secretary of Defense William Cohen – the first post-war visit by a U.S. Defense Secretary. In July 2000, President Clinton signed a Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) with Vietnam and announced it at a White House Rose Garden Ceremony. On September 6, 2000 at the United Nations General Assembly meetings in New York, Vietnam President Tran Duc Luong invited President Clinton to visit Vietnam. President Clinton accepted and on November 16, 2000 became the first president to visit Vietnam since 1969.¹⁴ The visit was a huge hit with the Vietnamese as thousands lined the streets to catch a glimpse of the President and First Lady. However, in the words of Mark E. Manyin, a long-time follower of Vietnam's issues for the U.S. Congressional Research Services, despite the public diplomacy success, President Clinton's private and public remarks concerning "human rights and democratization, triggered rhetorical responses from conservative Vietnamese leaders."¹⁵

In July 2001, Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Vietnam. The following year Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Manh Cam and Vice President Nguyen Thi Binh visited the U.S. On 10 November, 2003, during his historic visit to the U.S., Vietnamese Defense Minister Pham Van Tra held a landmark meeting with U.S. Secretary of Defense Ronald H. Rumsfeld. Nine days later, the USS Vandergrift visited the port of Saigon in Ho Chi Minh City, the first visit by a U.S. Navy ship to a Vietnamese port since the end of the war.¹⁶

However, due to the perceived poor human rights records in Vietnam, the relationship hit rocky ground when the Vietnam Human Rights Act (H.R. 1587) was introduced in the House of Representatives on April 3, 2003 and later reached the Senate as part of the House Foreign Relations Authorization Act (H.R. 1950). The bill passed the House in July but died in the Senate the same year.¹⁷

The second U.S. Navy ship visit to Vietnam, the USS Curtis Wilbur DDG-54, dropped anchor in Da Nang – near the famous wartime China Beach – on July 28, 2004. The same year, however, the relationship encountered another bump when the U.S. designated Vietnam a Country of particular Concern (CPC) under the U.S. Religious Freedom Act on September 15.

The Forging-Ahead Years

Despite serious obstacles posed by the Vietnam Human Rights and Religious Freedom Acts, the relationship continued to forge ahead due to focused leadership and concessions made by both the USG and GVN. Vietnam's main objectives were to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) and gain a non-permanent seat on the United Nation's Security Council. Besides the obvious objective of improved human rights condition in Vietnam, the U.S. focused on building on the 2001 U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral

Trade Agreement for improved bilateral trade and business access to U.S. companies in Vietnam.

January 2005 yielded fruitful talks between the U.S. and Vietnam in Hanoi on WTO accession. Addressing the human rights and religious concerns, the GVN published a Government Decree to permit “house churches” in the Central Highlands. In May 2005, the U.S. and Vietnam signed the Country of Particular Concern Agreement, establishing a new accord on religious freedom for Vietnam. This agreement led to a June 2005 visit to the U.S. by Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, the first Vietnamese Prime Minister to visit the U.S. since the end of the war. During the visit, the Prime Minister met with President George W. Bush and signed a number of agreements; most notably an end-user agreement paving the way for International Military Education Training (IMET) and the sale of non-lethal defense articles to Vietnam.¹⁸

2006 was a banner year for U.S.-Vietnam relations. Building on the momentum gained in 2005, the year started with a bang on the human rights front when Vietnam, after a three year hiatus, resumed bilateral talks with the United States in Hanoi on human rights on 20 February. The positive developments continued with the signing of U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Agreement on Vietnam WTO accession in Ho Chi Minh City on 31 May. A week later, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld visited Hanoi to discuss ways to further defense cooperation. Critical to furthering the momentum was the confirmation of improved religious freedom in Vietnam by the U.S. Ambassador-at-large for international religious liberty, John V. Hartford, during his August 2006 visit to Hanoi. This favorable announcement was followed by the Vietnam’s National Assembly’s

published acceptance of the 11th draft law on Rights of Association, ensuring Vietnamese the right of association via Article 69 of Vietnam's 1992 Constitution.¹⁹

The successes of 2006 culminated in November with Vietnam hosting the 2006 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit and APEC CEO Summit, and the official State visit by President George W. Bush and Secretary Condoleezza Rice to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.²⁰ One month later, on December 8, 2006, after years of debates and by a fairly-narrow margin of (212-184), the U.S. House of Representative passed H.R. 6406 granting permanent normal trading relations (PNTR) status for Vietnam. The U.S. Senate quickly followed suit and by an overwhelming majority vote of (79-9), passed the combined bills (H.R. 1100 and H.R. 6111) officially granting PNTR to Vietnam.²¹ On January 11, 2007, after 12 years of negotiation, Vietnam became the 150th Member of the World Trade Organization. Towards the end of that year, on October 16, Vietnam was elected to a non-permanent seat on the United Nation Security Council.

The Temporary Lull Before the Surge Years

After 2007, there was a lull in the overall U.S.-Vietnam relationship. This possibly was a result of both sides needing a tactical pause after having worked so hard to attain what they sought in the relationship. Despite the momentary pause in effort, the relationship again gained momentum with the June 2008's visit by Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung to Washington. During the visit, PM Dung met with President George W. Bush and Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates. The main outcome from the visit was an agreement to conduct annual meetings on political-military affairs, co-chaired by the U.S. State Department and Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The

inaugural Political-Security-and-Defense Dialogue (PSDD) was held in October the same year.

2009 saw an uptick in military to military activities, the first notable event came in April 2009 when Vietnam MND officials landed on the USS JOHN C. STENNIS (CVN 74) as it through transited the South China Sea (SCS). The at-sea visit was the first by a Vietnamese delegation since the end of the war²² and was quickly followed by a Joint U.S. delegation visit to Vietnam.²³ The purpose of the Joint visit was to work out detailed plans to further humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and search and rescue (HA/DR/SAR) efforts - the most promising and non-contentious civilian-military or military-military cooperative areas of discussion with Vietnam. The meeting in April led to a productive June 2009 visit to USPACOM and Washington DC by a delegation from the Vietnam National Committee for Search and Rescue (VINASARCOM), led by Lieutenant General Tran Quang Khue, the Standing Vice Chairman of VINASARCOM and Deputy Chief of the Vietnam People's Army General Staff.²⁴ For the first time in the relationship, the VINASARCOM delegation was allowed to observe a live HA/DR/SAR exercise – Makini Pahili – the annual disaster preparedness exercise in Hawaii. The delegation also visited the Pentagon, National Defense University, the Headquarters of the U.S. Coast Guard and its training center in York Town. Also, during this visit, the U.S. introduced the concept of State Partnership Programs (SPP) to Vietnam.

In June 2009, for the first time since normalization, Vietnam allowed an oceanographic survey ship, the USNS Bruce C. Heezen to conduct hydrographic survey for U.S. MIA wrecks within Vietnamese waters. The sponsor for the visit was the Vietnam Office for the Seeking of Missing Person (VNOSMP).²⁵ The historic mission

confirmed the location of a number of U.S. wreckages which led to future recovery missions the following years.

In July 2009, Vietnam allowed the U.S. 13th Air Force to conduct the inaugural Pacific Angel humanitarian mission in Quang Tri Vietnam.²⁶ Also in July, Vietnam allowed the U.S. Army Pacific to conduct a Medical Readiness Training Exercise (MEDRETE) in the country. During the mission, U.S. Army medical personnel conducted civilian medical outreaches and held joint training to certify Vietnamese People's Army Military Medical Department personnel in emergency-combat life-saving skills. Lastly, July also saw the Vietnam MND allowing the first USPACOM delegation to observe a Disaster Relief/Search and Rescue demonstration in Vietnam.²⁷

The culmination of 2009 was a December visit to USPACOM and Washington by General Phung Quang Thanh, the Defense Minister of Vietnam. During a meeting with Secretary Gates, Minister Thanh informed the U.S. of Vietnam's decision to open a number of previously restricted sites for joint recovery missions. The meeting between the two military leaders also formally established the Assistant Secretary level Defense Policy Dialogue, as well as a plan to conduct joint SAR activities and possibly a joint patrol at sea, and further develop HA/DR cooperation. Secretary Gates also encouraged Vietnam to join UN peacekeeping efforts.

During the meeting, Minister Thanh officially requested the U.S. lift restrictions against the purchase of lethal U.S. defense articles. The meeting concluded with Minister Thanh inviting Secretary Gates to attend the inaugural Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Defense Minister Meeting plus (ADMM-Plus) in Vietnam in 2010.²⁸

The Surge to Present Height in Relationship

With China's growing assertiveness in the SCS as backdrop, Vietnam's assumption as Chair of ASEAN, and the 15th anniversary of normalization with Vietnam, 2010 saw a huge surge in U.S.-Vietnam activities. In March, General Gary North became the first serving U.S. Pacific Air Forces Commander to visit Vietnam since the end of the war. In May, General North's Navy counterpart, Admiral Patrick M. Walsh, Commander of U.S. Pacific Fleet visited.²⁹ June 2010 brought the first visit by USPACOM Commander, Admiral Robert F. Willard, to Hanoi and Da Nang. June also saw Vietnam host the third iteration of the Political Security Defense Dialogue in Hanoi.

In July Secretary of State Hillary Clinton traveled to Vietnam for the ASEAN-U.S. Ministerial Meeting. During her speech to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the U.S.-Vietnam relations, Secretary Clinton acknowledged that while there are differences on the human rights front, the relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam was not bound by the disagreement and that the U.S. was prepared to take the relationship to the strategic-partnership level.³⁰

August brought the return of the USS John McCain to Vietnam for the official annual ship visit, and the second fly-out to visit a U.S. aircraft carrier. This time it was the USS George Washington (CVN 73).³¹ In August, the relationship received another boost when Vietnam hosted the inaugural Defense Policy Dialogue, bringing to fruition one of the initiatives Secretary Gates and Defense Minister Thanh agreed on the previous December. September brought back to Hanoi the PACOM led Bilateral Defense Dialogue (BDD). However, unlike previous BDD processes, the 2010 dialogue was chaired by flag officers.³²

The culmination of defense related engagement with Vietnam arrived in October 2010 when Defense Secretary Gates attended the inaugural ADMM-Plus. Capping off this height of activities in 2010, Secretary of Navy Raymond E. Mabus and Army Chief of Staff, General George W. Casey visited Vietnam in November 2010. For General Casey, the visit was especially emotional and memorable since he was able to also visit the exact site where his father was killed during the war.³³

In 2011, the relationship saw a number of other significant developments in addition to established meetings such as the PSDD, and BDD. Among the more notable, were Vietnam's decisions to host first-ever Navy to Navy Talks in March 2011, the Airman to Airman Talks in August 2011, and Vietnam handing over the decade-long-awaited archival records for American POW/MIAs. The culmination of 2011 was the return visit to the United States by newly promoted Senior Lieutenant General Nguyen Chi Vinh – the Deputy Minister of Defense – for the second iteration of the Defense Policy Dialogue and signing of the U.S.-Vietnam Memorandum of Understanding on military cooperation; the most comprehensive military-to-military agreement between the two countries since the end of the war.³⁴

2011 also saw, for the first time since the end of the war, a Vietnamese officer attending the year-long course at the National Defense University and two officers attending the Naval Staff College. There were also faculty-exchange visits between the U.S. National Defense University (NDU) and Vietnam National Defense Academy. Additionally, the U.S. shared the U.S. Coast Guard's Search and Rescue Optimal Planning System (SAROPS) with VINASARCOM. This multi-years effort resulted in a

much needed program being installed in various Vietnam Maritime Rescue Coordinating Centers (MRCC) and improved Vietnam's capabilities in SAR operations.³⁵

With the increase in military-to-military activities, the beginning of 2012 saw the GVN approve establishment of the U.S. Office of Defense Cooperation in Vietnam. Other highlights included the 3rd visit by the U.S. Secretary of Defense, the 3rd visit by the U.S. Secretary of State, and – after three years of close coordination – the National Guard Bureau approved establishment of a SPP relationship between the Oregon State National Guard and Vietnam.³⁶ 2012 also saw the return of the first Vietnamese officer to the Army War College since the end of the war, as well as the second officer attending the NDU.

Strategic Catalysts Analysis

What strategic catalysts facilitated the increased military cooperation and moved the relationship to its current height? Looking at the on-going disputes in the SCS and China's growing assertiveness in the region, coupled with the Vietnam's currently-less-than-capable ability to defend its vital interests, part of the answer – from both the U.S. and Vietnamese perspectives – is fairly obvious...China. However, the other major relations expeditor that needs mentioning is the GVN's increasing surefootedness in regional and international organization. Over the most recent decade, the GVN has critically and systematically examined the assumptions underlying its foreign policy priorities – in part to best meet new defense and security challenges, in part due to better recognition of ASEAN growing confidence and influence, and according to Dr. Stern, “in part as recognition of the need to rationalize thinking about engagement with big countries in order to attract the economic and defense resources necessary to continue to modernize the economy and equip the military to conduct its missions in the

21st century.”³⁷ These deliberate examinations resulted in enhanced Vietnamese capability to better focus and prioritize the development of its international relations, and in the case with the United States – height in relations.

The Main Issues

Examining the developments in the U.S.-Vietnam relationship through the years, there is little doubt as to the progress made. However, despite major improvements in U.S.-Vietnam relations, more must be done to better address one of the main obstacles preventing the relationship from elevating to the next level – that being the lack of trust – on both sides of the ocean.³⁸

Without the prerequisite trust, it is unlikely that the U.S. will see the relationship develop to the strategic-partnership envisioned by our senior leaders. If the relationship does progress, it will likely take years before rising to the desired level. With China’s growing assertiveness in the SCS, do we have the luxury of time to proceed with the current methodical pace; or should we speed up the process? As we rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific, are we putting our vital national interests at risk by not speeding up the process to solidify our strategic partnership with Vietnam; arguably, the most geographically strategic country of South East Asia? Is it a reality that when it comes to foreign relations, size matters? Thus, if push comes to shove, the U.S. would always default her inclination more towards China than Vietnam?

Sidestepping the different positions concerning the rate of relationship development, the opposing stances about what should be done to best counter China’s current aggressive stance in the SCS; and arguably China’s seemingly more important position in the U.S. foreign policy realm, what could and should the U.S. do to

strengthen trust with Vietnam? What other actions should the U.S. initiate to nurture and further the military to military relationship with Vietnam?

Before looking into the recommendations, let us first examine the issue of trust. From the U.S. perspective, the main obstacle is Vietnam's human-rights record. While there have been improvements on certain fronts, mainly in religious freedom, Vietnam's suppression of political dissent has continues to be a main issue of contention, drawing criticisms from successive U.S. administrations, as well as from members of Congress and the U.S. public. The general concern for the U.S. is the slippage of human rights in Vietnam; thus, the recently vociferous calls to put Vietnam back on the list of Countries of Particular Concerns (CPC) and the move to tie the increase of non-humanitarian assistance to the GVN's human rights performance. According to the latest statistics from the U.S. State Department, within the last two years, the GVN has convicted about two dozen political dissents and has arrested more than a dozen others. The GVN continues to tighten controls over the internet, press, and freedom of speech. The government has arrested, jailed, and convicted internet bloggers for writing about corruption and protesting China's actions in the SCS.³⁹

Vietnam on the other hand continues to question U.S. intentions and has verbally articulated its concerns in high-level dialogues. The main question has been "how can our two countries move to the desired strategic-partnership level if there are preconditions?" Vietnam's concern essentially is about trust – trusting that the U.S. is helping Vietnam because it is more interested in building Vietnam's capacity to better defend both countries' mutual interests in the SCS, and less so on undermining the supremacy of the Communist Party through democratizing "peaceful-evolution" process.

The continual U. S. refrain on human rights reform is unnerving to the GVN leadership. Looking back at Vietnam's recent history – through the lenses of the Vietnamese – one may better understand the root of the distrust.

Besides from the ever-present fear of the U.S. fomenting “peaceful evolution” in Vietnam, the Vietnamese see the U.S. as a “fair-weather” friend and regularly point to the U.S. wavering commitment as the source of mistrust. In Vietnam's case, the United States' abandonment of South Vietnam is one glaring example. Another example is the United States' perceived moral failure for reneging on President Nixon's secret pledge to fund post-war reconstruction costs. The most often mentioned example for the lack of trust, however, involves the United States' failure to intervene in the Paracel Islands in 1974. Not well known by most observers, during the middle of January 1974, China moved to finally push Republic of Vietnam (RVN) forces out of the Paracel Islands. Despite being a close ally of the South Vietnamese Government and facing the destruction of a number of RVN Navy frigates and lives, the U.S. – specifically the U.S. 7th Fleet – ignored the RVN Navy's call for help and allowed China to take over the Paracels without intervention.⁴⁰

These incidents left indelible marks in the Vietnamese psyche. From their perspective – sharpened by specific historical records – if the U.S. chose not to live up to her moral obligations with their like-minded South Vietnamese allies, how can it be truly trusted with a seemingly different-minded Communist Vietnamese nowadays? The answer of course is “with difficulties.” What then should be done to better earn and further the trust?

What should be done?

To further trust and establish more fertile ground for the “strategic partnership” seed to germinate (not to mention the obvious need to continue working towards fully implementing the agreements established within the 2011 MOU on Defense Cooperation; and building on lynch-pin legacy issues such as MIA, Agent Orange/dioxin remediation and demining), the U.S. should do the following:

- Confirm the trust by lifting the long-standing lethal-arms sale restriction against Vietnam;
- Work with the Vietnamese to set up a workable roadmap toward a bi-laterally acceptable agreement on human rights reforms; and
- Facilitate both by linking the sale of lethal arms to specific human rights improvements.

First, Vietnam views the SCS as an existential problem. To defend its interest and improve its survivability, it wants U.S.-prohibited-lethal arms. Vietnam sees the U.S. lethal-arms-sale prohibition as evidence of lack of trust. Vietnam has demonstrated that it could purchase lethal defense articles elsewhere, as it has done so with Russia, Ukraine, Spain, and a number of other nations. However, Vietnam wants U.S. equipment, and via official channels, the GVN has repeatedly asked the U.S. to remove the prohibition. Due to committed weapon purchase elsewhere and funding constraints, it is uncertain that Vietnam would buy U.S. lethal defense articles if it could; however, removing the prohibition would send a very clear message to Vietnam that the U.S. trusts Vietnam's intentions.⁴¹ The move would also let those around the world in general – and Vietnam's immediate-northern neighbor in particular – know that the U.S.-

Vietnam relationship is indeed getting closer; and – if needed – that Vietnam has access to the entire range of U.S. defense capabilities to better defend not only the U.S. or Vietnam's interests, but also those of ASEAN and arguably others around the world. From the Vietnamese MND's standpoint, the removal of the prohibition would go a long way to remove the distrust and lay a firmer foundation to build the relationship to the next level.

Second, the time is now ripe for the U.S. to work more closely with Vietnam on human rights reform. The process has already begun, but needs further tweaking. In 2012, Department of State officials discussed with their Vietnamese counterparts a range of human rights issues, and made clear that improvements by Vietnam would help facilitate the building of closer strategic relations. However, the progress has been limited. The main cause appears to lie in the GVN's ever-present fear that more progress on human rights would further erode the supremacy of the Communist party, thus, Vietnam's governing system in its present form.⁴²

The obstacle is high but not insurmountable. As shown during the process towards WTO accession and acceptance as non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, Vietnam is capable of making human rights concessions if it is convinced that it is in its best interest to do so. The U.S. must present a consistent, coherent picture to the Vietnamese that we are truly interested in helping Vietnam.⁴³ To be more effective on the human rights front, all U.S. Departments, including DOD, must be on board with State. A much needed start is for all U.S. Departments to get together, within the interagency mechanism, hash out and come to agreement what "right-looks-like" on

human rights for Vietnam then design a jointly-agreed-upon roadmap on human rights reform to deliver and continually reinforce the message to the GVN.

Last, to garner better support for the lifting of lethal-arms sale restriction to Vietnam, via interagency deliberations, the USG must come to agreement about how to best link progress on human rights with the sale of lethal-defense articles to Vietnam. The recommended solution is to synchronize a clear roadmap on human-rights progress with a thoroughly-vetted and interagency-approved list of prioritized-defense-articles to sell to Vietnam. On a quid-pro-quo basis, the USG would then be able to follow an established plan to incrementally approve the sale to particular lethal-defense articles as needed. The recently established ODC Hanoi would be the initiator for the prioritized list of lethal-defense articles. The ODC Chief would need to closely coordinate the list with the Vietnam MND and vet the list through PACOM, Defense Security Assistance Agency, State Department Office for Defense Trade Controls, and the interagency. As a show of trust and to kick-start the process, the USG should approve the immediate sale of maritime defense articles to Vietnam. The already approved sale of Raytheon's High Frequency Surface Wave Radar (HFSWR) to the Vietnamese Navy is a good start, but other Intelligence-Surveillance-Reconnaissance (ISR) defense articles to improve the Vietnam's situational awareness of the SCS are needed. Following the release of ISR articles to Vietnam, depending on the GVN's specific progress on human-rights, the next area of military articles that the USG could release to Vietnam should be defensive in nature.

Offensive type equipment would be last in the realm of lethal-arms sale to Vietnam and would be conditional on significant human rights progress – the definition

of which still needs to be deliberated on and agreed upon by the interagency. Periodic checks and reports on progress must then follow the plan to keep the USG apprised on the situation. The State Department Annual Report on Human Rights would be an obvious start; however, a more frequent-official-progress report is needed and this could be provided via requiring Embassy Hanoi to deliver a semi-annual report on human rights. Reinforcing-message deliveries on human-rights progress directly to the Vietnamese and indirectly to the various interest groups in the United States would occur through the annual U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue on Human Rights; U.S.-Vietnam Political-Military Dialogue, Defense Policy Dialogue, Bilateral Defense Dialogue, and as needed high-level-reciprocal visits. However, unlike the usual on-going remarks about human rights in formal or informal meetings, if and when approved, future reinforcing messages – from all departments – must specifically link back to the human rights road map and if needed, specific piece of releasable military equipment. Only by doing so will the USG be able to convince the GVN that it is serious in its intent of not only helping Vietnam, but also improving the rights of its people.

Conclusion

Despite the differences, the United States and Vietnam have continued to find common grounds to cooperate, as shown by the many accomplishments over the years, inside and outside of the military-to-military arena. The relationship has improved dramatically since President Clinton's announcement of normalization over 17 years ago. He led from the front, made decisive decisions, and pressed forward with his vision despite concerns about the then lack of progress on MIA accountability and human rights. With China's ever-increasing aggressiveness in the SCS and Vietnam growing closer with the U.S., the time is ripe for our current President to also lead with

decisiveness by assisting Vietnam to modernize its armed forces with U.S. made military equipment; enabling Vietnam to improve its human rights record through a jointly agreed roadmap; and invigorating the process by establishing specific linkage between the two. Unfortunately, with China as part of the equation, we can never be 100% certain that – if executed as outlined – the U.S.-Vietnam relationship will rise beyond the current ceiling. What we can be certain of, however, is that failing to do so will limit the progress and not get us to where our senior leaders want the relationship to be. The question is will we make the next deliberate move?

Endnotes

¹ William J. Clinton: "Remarks Announcing the Normalization of Diplomatic Relations With Vietnam," July 11, 1995. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=51605> (accessed November 28, 2012).

² Jim Garamone, "Panetta's Cam Ranh Bay Visit Symbolizes Growing U.S.-Vietnam Ties," June 3, 2012. <http://www.defense.gov/utility/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=116597> (accessed October 5, 2012). For an exact transcript of the Secretary's speech, see U.S. Department of Defense News Transcript "Secretary Panetta Speaking to the Crew of USNS Byrd in Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam," June 3, 2012. <http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=5050>

³ Via a secret letter, which was written on February 1, 1973 and released by the Government of Vietnam for public dissemination on May 19, 1977, President Nixon secretly promised to Prime Minister Pham Van Dong the amount of \$4.7 Billion in economic assistance as part of the Paris Peace Settlement in 1973. The President has promised \$3.25 billion in reconstruction aid and \$1.5 billion in commodity aid. Not known by most and disregarded by the then Carter Administration and U.S. Congress, the Vietnamese was counting on receiving this aid package as an integral part of the first post-war economic plan for Vietnam. Vietnamese economic planners led by leaders such as Le Thanh Nghi pressured the GVN so much so that during the initial phases towards normalization, the GVN was so adamant in demanding the aid that they made the aid package as a precondition for normalized relations with the United States. The GVN sees the U.S. failure to deliver on the promise made as a moral failure and this feeling adds much to the on-going sense of distrust. For more information see Nayan Chandra, *Brother Enemy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), p. 142-160. See also Bernard Gwertzman, "Kissinger to Seek 'Normalization' in Visit to Hanoi," *New York Times*, February 2, 1973. In this article, the NY Times listed the amount of aid as \$4.5 Billion, p.10.

⁴ Mr. Childress was a Colonel during his long tenure at NSC. After retirement, he continued to be associated with the League of POW-MIA Families by serving as a policy advisor to the

League – although in a less formal capacity, a position he continued to hold until now. Email correspondences with Ms. Ann Mills Griffith.

⁵ In discussing this issue with long time followers of Vietnam, Dr. Lewis M Stern and COL (Ret) William Jordan, the co-authors of “U.S.-Vietnam Defense Relations: Investing in Strategic Alignment,” Backgrounder, no. 2707 (July 18, 2012), both stressed that the POW/MIA issue if anything hardened the U.S. attitudes towards Vietnam. Not discounting this fact, my take on this particular issue, however, is despite the distrust and ill-feelings – no matter how slow, frustrating, messy, or painful it was, the interactions between our two countries in the eighties via the League of POW/MIA Families contributed much to the foundation of understanding between the two former enemies and played an important part in the final calculus for the eventual normalization, thus, needs to be credited.

⁶ JCRC was later designated as Joint Task Force Designated Full Accounting (JTF-FA) and in 2003, JTF-FA was designated as JPAC and Central Identification Laboratory and military headquarters were merged into this unit.

⁷ According to Dr. Stern, in early 1991, the U.S. presented to the GVN the plan for normalization. This “roadmap” was in no way a linear process as it involved a multi-dimensional four-phased approach through which bilateral relations would develop after Hanoi’s signing the international agreement for a peaceful settlement in Cambodia. “The document described how cooperation on the POW/MIA issue would influence the pace and scope of the normalization of relations. Each phase was coupled with a benchmark act of cooperation by Vietnam aimed at moving the process of accounting for missing Americans forward.” Email correspondences with Dr. Lewis M. Stern.

⁸ It must be noted here that by the end of 1991, the U.S. still held the view that Vietnam was not meeting specific requirements spelled out in phase one of the benchmark towards normalization. Specifically, the GVN has not satisfactorily accounted for the remaining Last-Known-Alive cases, not responded to the U.S. request to establish a mechanism to investigate live-sighting reports of missing Americans, and not been responsive to the proposal to establish a more continued joint field investigation operations via a 24-month concept of operations. However, the GVN, under the sound leadership of General Secretary Do Muoi, became more effective in managing relations. According to Dr. Stern, by early 1992, the GVN became more direct in urging that the POW/MIA issue be separated from other political issues in the discussion of bilateral relations between the U.S. and Vietnam, and that Hanoi and Washington “proceed with formal establishment of relations, and devoting the first stage of the new relationship to solving intractable problems.” This approach worked and by early 1992, the U.S. began to grant exceptions to the economic embargo against Vietnam. For example on 13 April 1992, the U.S. made an exception by allowing the establishment of telecommunications links with Vietnam; and on 29 April 1992, the U.S. lifted all humanitarian-non-profit NGOs activities in Vietnam and granting exceptions to permit commercial sales for basic human needs. Email correspondence with Dr. Lewis E. Stern, 30 January 2013.

⁹ Mark E. Manyin, *U.S.-Vietnam Relations in 2011: Current Issues and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, May 18, 2012), 4.

¹⁰ For more information on the chronology of U.S.-Vietnam normalization please see U.S. Vietnam Trade Council, *Chronology of Key Events in U.S.-Vietnam Normalization*,

<http://www.usvtc.org/us-vietnam/Chronology/Chronology%20of%20US-VN%20Normalization%206jul10.pdf> (accessed November 6 2012)

¹¹ Ibid., 3.

¹² William Jordan, Lewis M. Stern, and Walter Lohman, "U.S.-Vietnam Defense Relations: Investing in Strategic Alignment," Background, no. 2707 (July 18, 2012): 4.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ President Nixon was the last president to visit Vietnam (Saigon - now Ho Chi Minh City) in 1969. Mark E. Manyin, *U.S.-Vietnam Relations in 2011: Current Issues and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, May 18, 2012), 4.

¹⁵ Despite the good feeling about the visit, President Clinton's remarks reinforced the GVN's paranoia of "peaceful evolution" whereby the supremacy of communist ideologies would be supplanted by democratic ideals. A fear that was evident 17 years ago continues to plague the relationship nowadays. Ibid., 5.

¹⁶ U.S. Vietnam Trade Council, *Chronology of Key Events in U.S.-Vietnam Normalization*, <http://www.usvtc.org/us-vietnam/Chronology/Chronology%20of%20US-VN%20Normalization%206jul10.pdf> (accessed November 6 2012)

¹⁷ The bill was introduced again by Congressman Chris Smith as H.R. 3190 on 30 June, 2005, but failed to gain any momentum in the House. It was again reintroduced as H.R. 3096 in July 2007. It passed the House on September 18, 2007 but not by the Senate. Again it was reintroduced as H.R. 1969 on April 7, 2009, but the House failed to act on it. On April 7, 2011, Congressman Smith reintroduced the bill as H.R. 1410. The bill passed the House on September 11, 2012 and it is before the Senate. For more information on the background and status of the bill, please see <http://govtrack.us/congress/bills/112/hr1410>

¹⁸ "Timeline: US-Vietnam Relations," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* Vol.32, No. 3 (2010): 352

¹⁹ U.S. Vietnam Trade Council, *Chronology of Key Events in U.S.-Vietnam Normalization*, 8.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid. For more information also see "Timeline: US-Vietnam Relations," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* Vol.32, No. 3 (2010): 352

²² Please note that this was not the first time that the U.S. offered a fly-out to the Vietnamese. The U.S. had done so numerous times in the past; however, this was the first time that the Vietnamese accepted the offer. It should also be noted that only a month earlier, in March 2009, there was an incident in the South China Sea off of Hainan between a number of Chinese vessels and the USNS Impeccable (T-AGOS 23). The harassment of the USS Impeccable as it was conducting hydrographic survey in international water off of Hainan by approximately 5 Chinese ships could have played a role in tipping the Vietnamese leadership's decision to favor the offer and accept the fly-out to possibly show support for the U.S. freedom

of navigation efforts in the SCS. For more information on the USS Impeccable incident see Thom Shanker, "China Harassed U.S. Ship, Pentagon Says," *New York Times*, March 10, 2009.

²³ The delegation's members comprised of members from the Joint Staff, Office of the Secretary of Defense, U.S. Pacific Command, U.S. Pacific Fleet, the Meteorology and Oceanography Office, and the Naval Post Graduate School.

²⁴ The author accompanied the delegation during this visit. Besides LTG Tran Quang Khue, other members of the delegation includes, LtGen Nuyen Duc Son, Director of the Political Department, General Staff Command, Major General Nguyen Son Ha, Chief of Executive, VINASARCOM, Rear Admiral Tran Dinh Xuyen, Deputy Commander of the Navy Command Rear Admiral Pham Duc Linh - Director of the Marine Police Department. Rear Admiral Linh has since been promoted to Vice Admiral and still serving as the head of the Vietnam Marine Police. LtGen Son retired shortly after returning to Vietnam. MG Ha was promoted to Lieutenant General but has since retired.

²⁵ This was not the first time that the Heezen made a trip to Vietnam. The ship first returned to Vietnam in December of 2007 as part of the hydrographic exchange program. The visit was sponsored by Vietnam's Center for Hydrography and Meteorology, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. Prior to the 2007 visit, the Heezen was last in Vietnam in April 1975 to evacuate 180,000 refugees from South Vietnam. For more information on the Heezen's visit and background see Edward Baxter, "MSC Returns to Vietnam, Heezen Makes History in Vietnam" December, 2007, <http://www.msc.navy.mil/sealift/2007/December/Vietnam.htm> (accessed November 18, 2012). It should also be noted that according to Vietnamese Law, Decree 55, foreign military ships can only visit Vietnam once a year. For the official visit, the maximum number of ships can be up to three ships. To allow for more visits and in a certain way circumvent this limiting decree, the Vietnamese has allowed other agencies to sponsor a ship to visit Vietnam. For instance, the Bruce Heezen was sponsored VNOSMP, the semi-annual hospital ship UNSN Mercy is sponsored by the Ministry of Health, and USNS ships such as the Richard Byrd were sponsored by the Vietnam Ship Building Industry Group (VINASHIN).

²⁶ Quang Tri is located near the former DMZ. The site was heavily bombed and home of some of the fiercest fighting during the war. It is also is also the location for much of the ongoing U.S. MIA accountability and demining efforts. For more information on the 2009 Pacific Angel mission see Kerry Jackson, "Thousands helped as Pacific Angel Concludes," September 28, 2009, <http://www.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123169998> (accessed November 18, 2012).

²⁷ The U.S. delegation was the only foreign delegation allowed to observe the exercise which was held in Tra Vinh, Vietnam. Although termed exercise, the activity was more of a demonstration of capabilities. The allowance was meant to reciprocate the act by PACOM to allow the delegation from VINASARCOM to observe exercise Makni Pahili in Hawaii a month earlier.

²⁸ The ADMM+ was held in Hanoi in October 2010. Minister Thanh has always been thankful of the U.S. support in this effort and continually recalled the fact to other U.S. dignitaries that Secretary Gates was the first foreign military leader to confirm his attendance to the ADMM+. He repeatedly stated that it was Secretary Gates' leading-from-the-front confirmation that convinced other fence-sitting military leaders to follow suit and come to Vietnam for the inaugural ASEAN Defense Minister plus meeting.

²⁹ During Admiral Walsh's visit, he made a number of speeches concerning the importance of freedom of navigation and shared responsibilities at sea. A complete transcript of his speech at the Maritime Academy in Hai Phong can be found at U.S. Pacific Fleet's home page at <http://www.cpf.navy.mil/leaders/patrick-walsh/speeches/> (accessed December 1, 2012).

³⁰ The Secretary made a heartfelt and convincing speech during the event to celebrate the 15th anniversary of normalization. For more information on the Secretary speech during this and other events in Vietnam please refer to the American Embassy in Hanoi home page at http://vietnam.usembassy.gov/secstate_visits.html (accessed November 8, 2012)

³¹ The original plan was to include Senator McCain as part of the commemorative event. This idea was first broached by Minister of Defense Thanh to Senator McCain when he visited the Senator in December 2009; however, during this 2010 period, for the first time in many years, the senator was in a fight of his political career against J.D. Hayworth to keep his seat in the Senate. Senator McCain, thus, was unavailable for the event. He, however, did make a pre-recorded speech for the event which was played to a cheering audience at the ship-reception held on the USS McCain. The visit to the USS Washington has been an annual event since 2010. A Vietnamese delegation last paid visit to the USS Washington was on October 20, 2012.

³² For 2012, PACOM has elevated its lead participant to the Director of J-5.

³³ General Casey's father was one of the most senior American officers killed during the war. The elder Casey, MG George William Casey was killed on July 7, 1970 while serving as the Commander of 1st Cavalry Division. The elder Casey died during the same time as the younger Casey was pinning on his second Lieutenant bars. Young Casey never made it into Vietnam during the war and never visited the country until this historic visit. Vietnam MND facilitated the visit and helped to find the exact location where the elder Casey was killed. It was certainly an emotional and memorable visit for General Casey.

³⁴ The MOU built on the previous 5 agreed upon areas of establishing regular high level dialogue between the two defense institutions, maritime security, search and rescue, UN PKO, and HA/DR/SAR. Besides from spelling out with more specificity in each of the five areas of cooperation, the MOU also established action plan for other areas of cooperation such as demining, MIA accountability, Defense University and military institution exchanges, military education and training. Detail plan to implement the plan was to be worked out on a later date.

³⁵ During the assessment phase to install SAROPS (August 23-31, 2010) the U.S. was able to demonstrate the system's robust capability with a live case. This opportunity presented itself as the team was waiting to catch a flight from Ho Chi Minh City to Nha Trang on August 24. As the team was waiting, a large storm has just passed through Da Nang the night earlier and was still causing havoc to Vietnamese mariners. VINASARCOM received a distress call of a missing fishing boat and sailors from the Da Nang MRCC around 12:35 and by 12:50, using the SAROPS program, the U.S. team was able to pinpoint and provide to the MRCC the most probable site of the missing crew. By 2300, Vietnam SAR team found the missing boat and rescued the displaced crew. It also must be noted that since the installation of the SAROPS program at the various MRCCs in Vietnam (September 2011), Vietnam SAR authorities was able to conduct more successful rescue cases which they published frequently in newspaper articles. If one were to look through Vietnamese news reports for 2009, 2010, and part of 2011, there are only scant reports of successful SAR rescues.

³⁶ After three-plus years of works and alternating delegation exchanges, Vietnam formally requested to join the State Partnership Program (SPP) in 2011. Due to limiting funding, Vietnam was among the less-than-handful of countries granted to be a part of SPP in recent years. With State Department and PACOM endorsements, the National Guard Bureau approved the establishment of the relationship between Vietnam VINASARCOM and the Oregon State National Guard in November 2012.

³⁷ Email correspondences with Dr. Lewis Stern

³⁸ In discussing the issue of trust with Dr. Lewis Stern, he offered a critical assessment of U.S. policy in general. He highlighted that the U.S. has not been consistently or effectively attentive to the Vietnamese sense of intangible requirements for bilateral and multilateral relationships: reciprocity, trust, gradual deepening of cooperation and transparent willingness to contribute to real and practical defense development. He poignantly argues that the above stated “intangibles” are seen by the Vietnamese as integral parts of the chemistry for foreign and defense relations; however, unfortunately these take backseat to “the legality of arguments, the formality of cooperation, the diplomacy in form and content of international relations.” Email correspondence with Dr. Lewis Stern 30 January 2013.

³⁹ The GVN has been very careful in its efforts to keep the Vietnamese public sentiment from getting out of control. On the one hand, it is useful to let the Vietnamese vent their frustration against China’s aggressive stance in the SCS; on the other hand, the GVN does not want to let public demonstrations get out of control where the demonstrators may ask why the GVN is not doing more to counter China’s action; thus, weakening the status of the Communist Party – which could lead to a “Asian Spring” in Vietnam. To counter this threat, the GVN would either disband the crowd or arrest specific “instigators.” For more information on the U.S. State Department’s assessment of the human rights condition, see the State Department’s homepage on Vietnam at <http://www.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/vietnam/195238.htm>

⁴⁰ Having already announced and deep into the process of “withdraw with honor” from Vietnam in 1973, it would have been difficult for the U.S. to get involved in the Paracels in January 1974. China certainly knew that; thus, correctly placed its bets against the U.S. intervention when it chose to attack and seized the islands from the RVN forces. For a more detail account of the battle for the Paracel Islands in 1974, see Bruce A. Elleman, “China’s 1974 Naval Expedition to the Paracel Islands,” in *Naval Power and Expeditionary Warfare: Peripheral Campaigns and New Theatres of Naval Warfare*, ed. Bruce A. Elleman and S.C.M. Paine (New York: Routledge, 2011), 145-149. The Vietnamese also point to the lack of action by the Soviet Union as the main reason why they should not depend on any country to defend Vietnamese interests. The Soviet’s lack of action during China’s cross border attack in 1978 and later incursions into the Spratly Islands are prominent examples. Vietnam believes that it should never again depend on any one country for its national defense. In the military realm, while accepting the inherent disadvantage of lack of interoperability, Vietnam is proceeding with its plan to diversify the source of its military equipment by purchasing different equipment from different countries where/when possible. This is one of the main reasons why it is pursuing the authority to purchase lethal arms from the United States.

⁴¹ Vietnam MND does not want to depend on one particular nation for the supply of arms. Interoperability is one of the problems associated with the diversity of source for arms; however,

experience has shown the Vietnamese that they should never again put all their eggs in one basket. MND, thus, sees diversification of military equipment source as a needed safety net.

⁴² The dilemma for the GVN leaders is the fear that if they get too close to the United States, they would lose the Communist Party dominance; however, if they get too close to China, as their experience has shown, China would eventually consume Vietnam and they would lose the Country. The perpetual dilemma for the Vietnamese government has been how best to balance and navigate between these two forces.

⁴³ Perhaps one of the best pitches by a U.S. diplomat concerning overcoming human rights concerns was delivered by the Assistant Secretary of State for Asian and Pacific Affairs during one of his meetings with a Vietnamese military delegation in 2011. Referencing the need to overcome the concerns from the various camps within the U.S. about the seemingly deteriorating human rights conditions in Vietnam, but not belaboring the HR point, the Assistant Secretary of State used a phrase from the movie "Jerry Maguire" to stress the point and stated "please help us to help you!" The quote was a home run. The delegation fully understood the message and left the meeting touched by the heartfelt message without feeling beaten down by the usual human rights pitch.

