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A Balancing Act

Vietnam's Relations with the US and Russia

Akt balansowania

Wietnam i jego stosunki z Rosją i USA

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A Balancing Act: Vietnam's Relations with the US and Russia

Vietnam has been emblematic in illustrating the evolving dynamics of relations between most Southeast Asian states and great powers. As one of the states that has become increasingly prominent in the region, Vietnam has carefully cultivated its relations with both the United States and China as well as other major powers, employing what they call an omni-directional foreign policy (also known as multi-alignment). This paper examines Vietnam's multialignment strategy through Evelyn Goh's concept of enmeshment combined with Thomas Wilkins' alignment theory, which together capture the multidirectional character of Vietnam's foreign policy. It shows how Vietnam leverages engagement with multiple great powers to strengthen its international position and safeguard its interests, while preventing any single power from gaining excessive influence. This approach will be illustrated by comparing Vietnam's relations with Russia, its traditional and most influential supporter and the US, which has grown to be one of Vietnam's two most important partners (alongside China) to determine if and how these two partnerships are compatible in the long run and their relative weighting in Vietnamese foreign policy. The paper analyses whether and if so, why Vietnam is unwilling to relinquish its old alignments in favour of the new ones, as well as how these alignments are helpful in securing Vietnam's security and political interests.

Akt balansowania. Wietnam i jego stosunki z Rosją i USA

Wietnam jest symbolem ewoluującej dynamiki stosunków między większością państw Azji Południowo-Wschodniej a wielkimi mocarstwami. Jako jeden z podmiotów zyskujących coraz większe znaczenie w regionie starannie pielęgnuje on swoje relacje zarówno ze Stanami Zjednoczonymi, jak i Chinami oraz innymi mocarstwami, stosując wielokierunkową politykę zagraniczną. W niniejszym artykule przeanalizowano strategię wielokierunkowości Wietnamu w oparciu o koncepcję splątania Evelyn Goh w połączeniu z teorią aliansów Thomasa Wilkinsa, które razem oddają wielokierunkowy charakter polityki zagranicznej Hanoi. Pokazano, w jaki sposób państwo to wykorzystuje współpracę z wieloma mocarstwami do wzmocnienia swojej pozycji na arenie międzynarodowej i ochrony swoich interesów, jednocześnie zapobiegając nadmiernym wpływom którekolwiek z mocarstw. Podejście to zostanie zilustrowane porównaniem stosunków Wietnamu z Rosją, jego tradycyjnym i najbardziej wpływowym sojusznikiem, oraz Stanami Zjednoczonymi, które stały się jednym z dwóch najważniejszych partnerów Hanoi (obok Pekinu), co pozwoli ustalić, czy i w jaki sposób te dwa partnerstwa są kompatybilne w perspektywie długoterminowej oraz jaka jest ich względna waga w polityce zagranicznej Wietnamu. W artykule przeanalizowano, czy Hanoi zamierza zrezygnować ze swoich dawnych sojuszy na rzecz nowych (a jeśli tak, to dlaczego), a także w jaki sposób sojusze te służą bezpieczeństwu i interesom politycznym Wietnamu.

Introduction

Understandably, Vietnam, encircled by major and regional powers which have significant interests in the South China Sea and Southeast Asia, has had a persistent sense of insecurity. As posited by one scholar, “disparity in power generates insecurity; the way of providing for security is to establish a balance of power.”¹ In this context, a structural balance of power – characterised by the presence of multiple poles invested in regional stability – has historically prevailed in Southeast Asia. Preserving this equilibrium and the existing regional order remains a central objective for Hanoi, which has adopted a nuanced and multifaceted strategy to this end.

Due to this sense of insecurity, Vietnam has created a very concrete strategy, that aims to increase its sense of security and help realise national interests. As the country's former prime minister Vo Van Kiet stated, Vietnam should “interlock the diverse interests of different actors into situations that are favourable for Vietnam.”² This means that Hanoi has decided to engage with all major great powers, including those that are rivals with each other or even have adversarial relations. This paper aims to analyse why Vietnam may be unwilling to relinquish historical alignments with traditional partners for new ones, based on the case studies of Vietnam's relations with Russia and the US, its oldest and most important partners respectively.

The pragmatism of Vietnam's approach was evident in the 2003 *Strategy for Defence of the Fatherland in the New Situation*, which emphasised the removal of ideological constraints, thereby granting the Vietnamese government flexibility to define friends and adversaries independently of the communist solidarity.³ Such an approach, which emphasised multi-directional engagement with regional powers has been identified by Evelyn Goh as omni-enmeshment. She defines enmeshment as “a process

1 A. L. Vuving, *Strategy and Evolution of Vietnam's China Policy: A Changing Mixture of Pathways*, “Asian Survey” 2006, vol. 46, No. 6, p. 815.

2 Ibidem p. 810.

3 M. Ha, *Strengthening Defence and Security to Firmly Protect Homeland of Socialist Vietnam*, “National Defense Journal” (Hanoi) [online], 15 X 2015 [accessed: 15 X 2020]: <<https://tapchiquptd.vn/en/theory-and-practice/strengthening-defence-and-security-to-firmly-protect-homeland-of-socialist-vietnam/8189.html>>.

of engaging with a state to draw it into deep involvement in international or regional society, enveloping it in a web of sustained exchanges and relationships with the long-term aim of integration."⁴ It could be argued that Vietnam's limited alignment with multiple states is intrinsic to enmeshment itself: such selective alignments collectively create the web of relationships that Goh describes.

Enmeshment, as defined by Goh, shares key characteristics with multialignment, which is commonly understood as a pragmatic foreign policy approach in which states align, to varying degrees and at different times, with multiple powers or groupings depending on context and national interests.⁵ In particular, Vietnam is enmeshing great powers through a series of international agreements based on limited alignment with multiple states, including the US and Russia.⁶ These actions build up Vietnam's enmeshment which can be also characterised as multialignment. Alignment can be understood as a "broader and more functional term [...] defined as expectations of states about whether they will be supported or opposed by the other states in their future interactions."⁷ Alignments also have three main functions: reassuring the smaller state of the possibility of help, promoting predictability of actions and interactions between states and contributing to the regional peace.⁸ There is also an expectation of convergence on at least some interests: in the case of Vietnam and the United States, this takes the form of political engagement and a deepening alignment, while in the case of Vietnam and Russia, it centres on economic engagement and expansion.

4 E. Goh, *Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia*, "International Security" 2007, vol. 32, No. 3, p. 116.

5 I. G. W. Wicaksana, P. D. Yakti, *Indonesia's New Partial Multialignment Strategy: A Conceptual and Empirical Analysis*, "TRANS. Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia" 2025, vol. 13, issue 2. See also: J. C. Abraham, U. Purushothaman, *Limits of India-US Relations: Balancing through Strategic Autonomy and Multi-Alignment*, "Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs" 2024, vol. 11, issue 4, p. 496–514.

6 B. Tran, Y. Sato, *Vietnam's Post-Cold War Hedging Strategy: A Changing Mix of Realist and Liberal Ingredients*, "Asian Politics and Policy" 2018, vol. 10, No. 1, p. 75.

7 G. Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1997, s. 6.

8 A. O'Neill, *The Future of Alliances in Asia*, [in:] *Handbook of Asian Security Studies*, ed. S. Ganguly, J. Liow, Routledge, New York 2020.

As the function of multialignment is to stabilise the region, they are therefore the perfect vehicle for realising Vietnamese foreign policy goals as opposed to great powers and their interests in the region.⁹ This builds a circular mechanism: Vietnams' attempts at increasing engagement with regional powers bring an increase of investments,¹⁰ which in turn allow greater multialignment and engagement with regional powers.

Russia is Vietnam's oldest partner, but over time its role in Vietnamese strategy has waned significantly, replaced by China and the US. Moscow remains, however, an important part of the puzzle, as from Hanoi's perspective it provides additional balance to the regional dynamics dominated by US-China rivalry. Vietnam has been working hard for years to ensure that actions undertaken by either Moscow or Washington would be predictable when it comes to Vietnam and would not disrupt regional stability.¹¹

This strategy aims to enhance regional stability through increased institutionalised cooperation and to preserve the current balance of power, which maximises Vietnam's decision-making autonomy and safeguards its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The 9th Party Congress affirmed in 2001 that "Vietnam sought to become a trusted partner of every country in the international community," which called for a dialectical approach: recognising cooperative opportunities even among adversaries and acknowledging differences even among partners.¹²

Vietnam's omni-enmeshment and the role of alignments

Alignment with multiple powers is intended not only to prevent isolation but also to stabilise the region amid uncertainties arising from China's rise and assertiveness.¹³ The balance of power in Southeast Asia has become increasingly unstable due to shifts in the relative power of key actors, especially

- 9 B. Kratiuk, *Strategic Alliances and Alignments in Indo-Pacific*, [in:] *Handbook of Indo-Pacific Studies*, ed. B. Kratiuk [et al.], Routledge, New York 2023, p. 249.
- 10 H. Bui, Q. Luu, *Russia's Pivot to Asia and Russia-Vietnam Economic Relations in the Early 21st Century*, "Emerging Science Journal" 2022, vol. 6, No. 6, p. 1492–1503.
- 11 A. L. Vuving, *Strategy...*, p. 815.
- 12 Nguyen M. H., *New Context of Vietnam's National Security Challenges*, ISEAS Publishing, Singapore 2016 (*Trends in Southeast Asia*, 17), p. 7.
- 13 B. Tran, Y. Sato, *Vietnam's...*

China. Any resultant transformation of the international system or hierarchy would be contrary to Vietnam's interests, which favour the *status quo*. Consequently, Vietnam, alongside other Asian states, endeavours to maintain a Southeast Asian balance of power comprising major regional players such as the United States, China, Japan and India, to prevent any single power from achieving dominance. Vietnam is building selective alignments with all these partners to stabilise and strengthen its international position.

This approach is typical of states managing asymmetrical relationships, as it mitigates threats and facilitates resistance against larger powers. Multipolarity in Southeast Asia would reinforce the existing balance of power and, if effectively implemented, promote regional institutionalisation, thereby constraining the actions of major powers. This strategy operates through three primary mechanisms: legitimate inclusion, institutionalised interaction, and cooperative security. States actively seek to integrate potential great power rivals into regional institutions to ensure balanced engagement of those states in regional matters.¹⁴

Alignments with Russia and the US, as well as with other states, each provide Vietnam with things it needs: from balancing influence of other states like India and Japan, through arms sales like Russia to trade deals like China and the US. Each is needed in different ways and with each of those actors, alignment will serve a different immediate purpose. However, each is too valuable to let go, as none of the other aligned states would be able to replace it.

Alignment with Russia

Russia was the first country to enter into a strategic partnership with Vietnam, formalising this relationship as early as 2001. The partnership was reaffirmed and elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2012, with a particular focus on seven key areas: oil and gas, energy cooperation (including hydro and nuclear power), military equipment and

14 N. Chapman, *Mechanisms of Vietnam's Multidirectional Foreign Policy*, "Journal of Contemporary Southeast Asian Studies" 2023, vol. 36, No. 2; A. Gerstl, *Southeast Asia's Grand Strategy: Hedging*, "Georgetown Journal of International Affairs" [online], 12 VIII 2024 [accessed: 3 XI 2025]: <<https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2024/08/12/southeast-asias-grand-strategy-hedging/>>.

technology, trade and investment, science and technology, education and training, as well as culture and tourism.¹⁵ This alignment is very active despite political pressures on Vietnam to impose sanctions or at the very least to distance itself from Russia since its invasion of Ukraine.

The historical roots of the Vietnam–Russia relationship stretch back to the Cold War era and even to the First Indochina War, during which the Soviet Union played a crucial role in supporting North Vietnam. However, the contemporary dynamics of the relationship are increasingly shaped by Russia's broader foreign policy priorities, which are largely oriented toward developments outside Southeast Asia, particularly its ongoing confrontation with Europe and the United States¹⁶ and have been so even before the war in Ukraine. This strategic preoccupation has limited Moscow's ability to engage more deeply in East Asia, thereby providing opportunities for other major powers, notably the United States and China, to expand their influence in the region at Russia's expense. Additionally, Russia's recently growing economic and strategic dependence on China – especially in the context of Western sanctions – has further complicated its position in Southeast Asia and diminished its ability to act as an independent balancer.

Despite these constraints, Russia and Vietnam remain aligned in their primary regional objective: the maintenance of security and stability as a foundation for economic development.¹⁷ Russia has been one of the key partners for Vietnam when it comes to multiple sectors of the economy: especially joint oil exploration.¹⁸ Moscow's official policy documents, such

15 N. Chapman, *Mechanisms...*

16 A. S. B. De Gurung, *The Vietnam-US Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: Long-Term Economic Objectives and Short-Term Strategic Gains*, "Indian Journal of Asian Affairs" 2023, vol. 36, No. 1/2, p. 83–92: <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27307177>> [accessed: 2 XI 2025].

17 Sh. Neelakantan, *Russia, Southeast Asia Draw Closer in Pursuit of Multipolar Political, Trade Ties*, "Radio Free Asia" [online], 6 III 2025 [accessed: 3 XI 2025]: <<https://www.rfa.org/english/southchinasea/2025/03/06/russia-southeast-asia-trade/>>.

18 Early joint oil exploration was done partially as a way for Vietnam to repay its debts to Russia and earlier USSR. Later the exploration was expanded as Russia was one of the few partners, that Vietnam had who were not afraid of exploration in contested waters. See: Bui H. [et al.], *Vietnamese–Russian Oil-and-Gas Cooperation in Russia's Far Eastern Policy (2001–2020)*, "Journal of Posthumanism" 2025, vol. 5, No. 6.

as the 2013 foreign policy concept, explicitly underscore the importance of consistently strengthening the strategic partnership with Vietnam,¹⁹ which is very important when considering that in political matters Vietnam and Russia did not always agree or align with each other.²⁰

Military cooperation constitutes a central pillar of the bilateral relationship.²¹ For many years, Vietnam has relied extensively on Russian military equipment and technology to modernise its armed forces, particularly as a means of indirectly balancing against China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea. Russian arms have long accounted for the majority of Vietnam's military imports,²² and the two countries have engaged in regular high-level defence dialogues, joint exercises, and technology transfers. However, this area of cooperation is not without its challenges. Russia's efforts to cultivate closer ties with Beijing, while simultaneously supplying advanced weaponry to Vietnam, present a delicate balancing act. Should China exert pressure on Moscow, Russia may be compelled to scale back its defence cooperation with Vietnam, thus undermining Hanoi's efforts to maintain a credible deterrent posture.

Another issue in arms procurement is the ongoing war in Ukraine. It has led to delays in production for foreign markets in Russia, as most of the new equipment is sent to the front. This has caused ten-

- 19 *Russian Foreign Policy Concept*, "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation" [online, accessed: 10 II 2018]: <http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186>.
- 20 Particularly important is the issue of South China Sea, where Russia has been supporting Chinese claims and ways of resolving the issue, which is very clearly against Vietnamese interests. With the current dependence on China, Russia is unlikely to change its stance. See press conference transcript: *Lavrov: South China Sea Issue Should Not Be Internationalized*, "CCTV News" [online], 29 IV 2016 [accessed: 3 XI 2025]: <<https://english.cctv.com/2016/04/29/VIDEH342vpXIETC8en2jQRoai60429.shtml>>.
- 21 Vuong Q.Kh., *Military Cooperation: A Crucial Pillar of Vietnamese-Russian Relations*, "German International Journal of Modern Science" 2025, No. 103: <<https://zenodo.org/records/15371099>> [accessed: 3 XI 2025].
- 22 Y. Nitta, *Vietnam Seeks Alternatives to Russian Arms at Defense Expo: U.S. and South Korea among Countries Eyeing Deals as Hanoi Modernizes Military*, "Nikkei Asia" [online], 19 XII 2024 [accessed: 3 XI 2025]: <<https://asia.nikkei.com/business/aerospace-defense-industries/vietnam-seeks-alternatives-to-russian-arms-at-defense-expo>>.

sions with Vietnam, as the state feels the need to increase its capacity due to the growing assertiveness of China in the region. Vietnam has also faced mounting pressure from its other partners, such as Japan and the US to stop buying arms from Russia as it helps the regime maintain its war effort and economy.²³

Energy cooperation, particularly in the oil and gas sector, represents another cornerstone of the Vietnam–Russia partnership. Russian companies such as Zarubezhneft, Gazprom, and Vietsovpetro have established a significant presence in Vietnam's offshore energy sector, contributing to the exploration and development of oil and gas fields in the South China Sea. While Vietnam has sought to ensure that these projects do not encroach upon contested waters, their very existence is strategically significant, both for Vietnam's economic development and for Russia's continued relevance in the region. Oil and gas revenues remain vital to Vietnam, with maritime economic activity expected to constitute a substantial share of its GDP.²⁴ Russia is also one of the few states willing to develop oil fields in parts of Vietnam's EEZ that China disputes, making it an especially important partner for Hanoi.

The ongoing military conflict in Ukraine has introduced new complexities into Vietnam's strategy of multialignment, particularly into its relationship with Russia. Vietnam has adopted a cautious and deliberately balanced stance, abstaining from United Nations votes condemning Russia while reiterating that disputes must be resolved peacefully and in accordance with international law. Nonetheless, the war has exposed vulnerabilities in Vietnam's heavy reliance on Russian military technology, raising concerns about the sustainability of this dependence in light of Western sanctions and Russia's shifting priorities.²⁵ Furthermore, Russia's deepening

23 D. Hutt, *Russia-Vietnam Ties Put US in a Sanctions Dilemma*, "Asia Times" [online], 21 IV 2022 [accessed: 3 XI 2025]: <<https://asiatimes.com/2022/04/russia-vietnam-ties-put-us-in-a-sanctions-dilemma/>>.

24 P. Tran, A. Vysotkaya G. Vieira, L. C. Ferreira-Pereira, *Vietnam's Strategic Hedging vis-à-vis China: The Roles of the European Union and Russia*, "Brazilian Review of International Politics" 2019, vol. 56, No. 1, p. 163.

25 N. Tran, *Implications of the "One Depend" Policy for Vietnam-US Relations: Opportunities and Constraints*, "Perth USAsia Center" [online, accessed: 3 XI 2025]: <<https://perthusasia.edu.au/research-insights/implications-of-the-one-depend-policy-for-vietnam-us-relations-opportunities-and-constraints/>>.

alignment with China – particularly its support for bilateral, rather than multilateral, approaches to the South China Sea disputes – has raised concerns in Hanoi. Vietnam fears that Beijing could leverage its influence over Moscow to pressure Russia into curtailing arms sales or energy cooperation with Hanoi, potentially undermining Vietnamese interests in the region. Statements from Russian officials, such as Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's assertion that disputes should be resolved directly between the parties involved without external interference,²⁶ reflect Moscow's reluctance to challenge Beijing's preferences, further complicating Vietnam's strategic calculus.

Given these developments, Vietnam has become increasingly cautious about deepening its relationship with Russia. While Hanoi continues to value the partnership – particularly in the realms of arms procurement and energy development – it is no longer as central to Vietnamese foreign policy as it once was. Vietnam has shifted its focus toward strengthening ties with other major powers, including the United States, India, and Japan, as well as deepening its engagement within ASEAN and its members. Russia's limited participation in Southeast Asian multilateral institutions and its prioritisation of other regions have further constrained the potential for expanded cooperation. For instance, Russia often sends lower-ranking officials to Asian summits, in contrast to the head-of-state or head-of-government representation typical of other major powers. Although the 2012 presidential decree ranked Asia-Pacific as the third most important region in Russian foreign policy, by 2013 it had been demoted to fourth place, signalling a relative decline in priority.

While the relationship has suffered some neglect due to an overall lack of interest of Russia in deepening its engagement with Southeast Asia for years, the war in Ukraine has changed that. The sanctions put on Russia forced it to look for closer partnerships outside of Europe, making Hanoi's relations with Moscow very visible, especially since 2023. In 2023 President Vladimir Putin first visited Vietnam to strengthen his

26 *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Questions at the Meeting in Mongolia's Foreign Ministry, Ulan-Bator, April 14, 2016*, "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation" [online], 14 IV 2016 [accessed: 3 XI 2025]: <http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJEO2Bw/content/id/2233937>.

own position in a context of waning international support and in 2025 there was a return visit from the Vietnamese officials for celebrations marking the end of the Second World War.

In May 2025, the Vietnamese president visited Russia to commemorate the Victory Day on the 9th of May. Also in attendance was President Xi Jinping of China as well as the representatives of Central Asia and other states that have maintained close relations with Moscow. During that visit the two commemorated the fact that in 2025 it is the 75th anniversary of diplomatic ties between Russia (previously the Soviet Union) and Vietnam. On that note, President Putin has said: "I consider the visit of our Vietnamese friends timed to coincide with the anniversary of the great victory as yet another evidence of our time tested friendship."²⁷ This narrative of a traditional alignment between Vietnam and Russia was strengthened by expansion of cooperation between the two in a set of agreements that included economics, scientific research energy sector, defence, and education.

Alignment with the United States

The alignment between Vietnam and the United States represents one of the most significant breakthroughs in the contemporary foreign policy of both states. While it should be noted that there is a clear imbalance in the relationship – the US is much more important for Vietnam than Vietnam is for the US, there has been a marked shift in Washington regarding the growing importance of Hanoi as a regional partner.²⁸ The establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2013 marked the culmination of efforts to move beyond the antagonism rooted in the Vietnam War. Instead, both countries, recognising their shared interests in the region, have chosen to prioritise regional cooperation. It also continues to be the basis for cooperation

27 *Press Statements Following Russian-Vietnamese Talks*, "President of Russia" [online], 10 V 2025 [accessed: 3 XI 2025]: <<http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/76892/videos>>.

28 *U.S. Security Cooperation with Vietnam*, "US Department of State" [online], 27 VII 2020 [accessed: 17 III 2022]: <<https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-vietnam-2/index.html>>.

and strengthening the alignment between the two states and includes the three necessary elements: inclusion, institutional interaction and cooperation in the field of security.²⁹

A central question arises regarding the ultimate nature of this cooperation between the United States and Vietnam. Relations between the two states remain cordial, with trade, military, and multilateral collaboration developing at a rapid pace. Both countries regard each other as important partners. Both Vietnam and the United States are invested in maintaining the regional power balance. For Hanoi, it is crucial to maintain US influence as a far-flung hegemon since that presence can counteract some of Beijing's influence in Southeast Asia.³⁰ From Vietnamese perspective, any shift away from that balance would likely be to China's advantage.³¹

This dynamic is reflected in the bilateral relationship: in 2013, the two countries formalised their comprehensive partnership, building on Secretary Hilary Clinton's earlier advocacy for a strategic partnership agreement in 2010. In 2014, the US Department of Defence identified Vietnam as one of its key regional partners. A recent *National Security Strategy* designates China as a strategic rival that "challenges American power, influence, and interests."³² Deepening partnership with Vietnam is thus intended to counteract perceived attempts to undermine American security and prosperity.

The cooperative security component of the alignment has been present almost since the rapprochement in the mid-1990s and it was the US that insisted on including and expanding this component of coopera-

29 B. Kratiuk, *Wietnam w amerykańskiej Strategii Równoważenia w regionie Azji Wschodniej w latach 1995–2016*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe „Scholar”, Warszawa 2021, p. 52.

30 E. Goh, *The Struggle for Order. Hegemony, Hierarchy and Transition in Post-Cold War East Asia*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, p. 268.

31 A. O'Neill, *The Future...*

32 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, SEAL of the President of the United States, Washington 2017: <<https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/NSS2017.pdf?ver=CnFwURrwO9pJoq5EogFpwg%3d%3d>> [accessed: 3 XI 2025].

tion.³³ The US-Vietnam cooperation has been designed not to upset other of Vietnam's partners, most notably China and Russia. One example of cooperation is the use of Cam Ranh Bay. The port has increasingly welcomed US naval vessels, including aircraft carriers. These visits are typically part of broader cooperation under the International Military Education & Training program (IMET), which is viewed as a long-term strategy to enhance the capabilities of the Vietnamese Navy and Coast Guard and thereby promote greater security and stability in the South China Sea.³⁴ To further support Vietnam's defence capabilities, President Barack Obama lifted the embargo on the sale of lethal weaponry to Vietnam. This move, widely regarded as the final step in normalising post-war relations, enabled Hanoi to procure arms from new sources. This has become increasingly important after the war in Ukraine started, as the US has been pressuring Vietnam to stop its arms purchases from Russia.³⁵

The United States has served as the principal defender of the global commons in East Asia since the end of the Cold War, which is one more reason why Vietnam is also willing to engage closely with the US in the field of security. These operations were intensified under the Obama administration and have continued under the Donald Trump administration since May 2017. The resumption of Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) around the Spratly Islands is intended to indirectly support other claimants, including Vietnam, and to ensure the security of navigation in the region. The importance of freedom of navigation was underscored during the May 2017 meeting between President Trump and then Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc.³⁶

Economic relations are also a focal point for both Vietnamese and American leaders. The United States remains the largest importer

33 L. M. Stern, *Building Strategic Relations with Vietnam*, „Joint Force Quarterly” 2012, issue 65, Qtr. 2: <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-65/jfq-65_53-60_Stern.pdf> [dostęp: 3 XI 2025].

34 Ibidem.

35 R. Yaacob, *Southeast Asia's Arms Suppliers, by the Numbers*, „The Interpreter” [online], 21 I 2025 [accessed: 3 XI 2025]: <<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/southeast-asia-s-arms-suppliers-numbers>>.

36 *Joint Statement by Vietnam, US after PM Phuc's Visit to White House*, „Tuoi Tre News” [online], 20 V 2025 [dostęp: 3 XI 2025]: <<https://tuoitrenews.vn/politics/41258/joint-statement-by-vietnam-us-after-pm-phucs-visit-to-white-house>>.

of Vietnamese goods, particularly agricultural and textile products. US investment in Vietnam has steadily increased, culminating in Vietnam's invitation to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Although the eventual US withdrawal from the TPP dealt a significant blow to its position in Asia and to the institutionalisation of interactions between the two states, ongoing engagement with Vietnam indicates that the Obama-era rebalance has not been entirely abandoned. Instead, the Trump and later Joe Biden administrations' Asia policy resembled that of President George Walker Bush: less prominent and on a smaller scale, but effective. Currently, the relationship has suffered some setbacks due to the threat of tariffs from the US and pressures regarding the Vietnamese stance on the war in Ukraine; however, both sides consider this relationship important enough to continue most of the work.

Vietnam tried to make friendly gestures early in 2025 when the plan for tariff implementation was first introduced as largely indiscriminate. Hanoi had hoped that by making some conciliatory gestures towards the Trump administration and its allies would enable it to escape the potential tariffs, like licensing Starlink or allowing Trump to build a resort in Vietnam. This, however, did not help Hanoi in avoiding possible tariffs. For this reason, the economic aspect of the cooperation remains much more difficult and it has forced Vietnam to seek alternative trading partnerships in the region, including one with Russia, while waiting out the changes proposed by President Trump.

Despite these setbacks, Washington willingly participates in Vietnam's strategy and would even prefer the alignment to be closer than it is. By bolstering Vietnam's regional position, the United States supports an advocate for its own most vital interest: the maintenance of the existing balance of power. This is, after all, one of the most important tenets of the Trump presidency, but was of equal importance to the presidents before him.³⁷

37 See: *National Security Strategy*, SEAL of the President of the United States, Washington 2015: <<https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/NSS2015.pdf?ver=TJJ2QfMOMCcQL-pNtKHtVQ%03d%3d>> [accessed: 3 XI 2025]; *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, SEAL of the President of the United States, Washington 2002: <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss2002.pdf?ver=oyVN99aEnrAwijAc_O5eiQ%03d%3d> [accessed: 3 XI 2025].

Do limited alignments work for Vietnam?

Vietnam's continued close relations with Russia have been under much pressure and criticism, particularly regarding what is seen as Vietnamese support for Russia in the UN.³⁸ However, the May 2025 visit of General Secretary Tô Lam to Moscow shows that Vietnam is unwilling to succumb to the pressure from either the EU or previous US administration. It is worth noting that had the United States not been led by Donald Trump – whose stance is viewed in Hanoi as distinctly favourable toward Russia – the new cooperation agreements would likely have been less overt and more modest in scope.

To balance alignment with Moscow, Hanoi tries to send signals to Washington about maintaining that relationship as well: the day after Putin's visit in 2023, there was a telephone call to the US State Department reported in local media to show that Vietnam clearly maintains this relationship as well. This type of behaviour is designed to ensure that neither of the main partners feels ignored by the government in Hanoi.

For Vietnam, Russia is a very comfortable partner, despite many misgivings it might have about violations of international law and international norms. Russia is a very clear source of arms investment and it is not a threat to Vietnam in the way that, for example, China is. Russia might have less influence in Asia Pacific than China, the US or even India, but especially in Southeast Asia, it remains an important partner, that has some of its interests aligned with Vietnam. The US on the other hand, remains the most important partner and a source of regional stability. As such, the alignments with both partners have their own roles to play in Vietnam's overall strategy.

The joint statement in 2024, made by then President Biden and General Secretary Tô Lam, showed clearly that all components of the alignment between Vietnam and the US are going well.³⁹ While there are setbacks

38 Vietnam has consistently abstained from voting in any General Assembly resolution that condemns Russia and the war and voted against removing of Russia from the UN Human Right Council. Vietnam has however always supported resolutions calling for immediate end of hostilities.

39 *Remarks by President Biden and General Secretary Tô Lâm of Vietnam before Bilateral Meeting*, "U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Vietnam" [online], 25 IX 2024 [accessed: 3 XI 2025]: <<https://vn.usembassy.gov/remarks-by-president-biden-and-general-secretary-to-lam-of-vietnam-before-bilateral-meeting-new-york-ny/>>.

based both on Trump's unpredictable policies towards Vietnam and the region on one hand and the political ambiguity cultivated by Vietnam on the other, the alignment will continue as the interests of both states remain the same: the continued American presence in East and Southeast Asia is necessary and wanted in Washington and in Hanoi, especially since China has been strengthening its regional position. Both governments are likely to continue working, albeit now perhaps in a lesser capacity, towards maintaining the US presence and position in the region.

For Vietnam, both states play important roles in their foreign policy. While the US is much more important in terms of both trade and political influence, Russia remains an important option for further engagement. The alignments are not equal, but in the times of uncertainty, that Vietnam and other states are experiencing in the face of the Trump administration's unreliability, Russia gained prominence as a stable partner. What is more, the alignment with Russia provides Vietnam with a greater sense of autonomy, as it does not force reliance on the US and its alliances.

Vietnam, therefore, would not be willing to relinquish its relationship with Russia for uncertain rewards from the US – there is no clear gain here for the government in Hanoi to do so. Instead, it would mean a loss of a potentially crucial partner, a traditional one, that has supported many of Vietnam's national interests over the years. With such a clear loss, Vietnam is unwilling to take the risk of disengaging from Russia and instead continues its alignment with both Washington and Moscow.

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