



## **US-Vietnam Relations: Entering a New Chapter**

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### **Executive Summary**

- On 10 September 2023, in Hanoi, US President Joe Biden and General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party Nguyen Phu Trong decided to elevate US-Vietnam relations from “Comprehensive Partnership” to “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for the purposes of peace, cooperation and sustainable development”. The two leaders publicly pronounced the decision during President Biden’s visit to Vietnam on 10-11 September 2023.
- The Joint Leaders’ Statement released shortly after this announcement has 34 paragraphs. The statement affirms that the US and Vietnam pledge to work together on 10 key areas namely (1) Political and Diplomatic Relations, (2) Economic, Trade, and Investment Cooperation, (3) Science, Technology, Innovation, and Digital Cooperation, (4) Education and Training Cooperation, (5) Climate, Energy, Environment, and Health Cooperation, (6) Addressing War Legacies, (7) Culture, People-to-People Ties, Sports, and Tourism, (8) Defense and Security, (9) Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, and (10) Coordination on Regional and Global Issues.
- The elevation of US-Vietnam relations to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership symbolizes the two countries’ commitment to forge stronger ties.
- The process towards this historic upgrade has been long and cumbersome. Yet, converged concern on China along with a shared understanding of the nature of partnership as well as domestic political consideration, especially in Vietnam, have all played roles in overcoming pre-existing hesitations and finally making this elevation possible nearly 30 years after the two countries normalized their relations.
- This diplomatic milestone and its whole process show Vietnam’s astute diplomacy in cautiously treading its relations with superpowers amidst uncertain regional and global security landscapes. The next important but difficult step is how Vietnam maintains and further capitalizes on this hard-earned momentum.

## Introduction

On 10 September 2023, in Hanoi, US President Joe Biden and General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party Nguyen Phu Trong decided to elevate US-Vietnam relations from “Comprehensive Partnership” to “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for peace, cooperation, and sustainable development”.<sup>1</sup> The two leaders publicly pronounced the decision during President Biden’s visit to Vietnam on 10-11 September.

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In the latter area, key regional and global issues that are explicitly mentioned in the joint statement between the US and Vietnam are the South China Sea, the Mekong sub-region, the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus on the situation in Myanmar, Peace and Denuclearization in the Korean Peninsula and Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> These indicate that the two countries attach importance to these regional and global issues, and see the need for the two sides to have more coordinated efforts to support each other in this respect.

All these cooperation areas reflect mutual desires between the two countries to enhance the depth and breadth of cooperation as their new height of relations has been embarked. This analysis will highlight key contexts leading to this elevation and discuss important rationales behind this historic upgrade of relations between the US and Vietnam.

## Towards Elevation

Since 2001, Vietnam has structured its foreign relations into three levels in the following order namely, Comprehensive Partnership, Strategic Partnership, and Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.<sup>4</sup> Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is the top-tiered diplomatic ladder accorded to countries that Vietnam “views as of great importance for its security, prosperity, and international standing”.<sup>5</sup> So far, only five countries have had this highest diplomatic status with Vietnam namely, China (2008), Russia (2012), India (2016), the Republic of Korea (2022) and the US (2023).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> White House. 11 September 2023. Joint Leaders’ Statement: Elevating United States-Vietnam Relations To A Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/11/joint-leaders-statement-elevating-united-states-vietnam-relations-to-a-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Carly Thayer

<sup>5</sup> Le Hong Hiep. 28 August 2023. Why Hanoi May Agree to a Vietnam-U.S. Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Fulcrum. Available at <https://fulcrum.sg/why-hanoi-may-agree-to-a-vietnam-u-s-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>

<sup>6</sup> Thanh Dinh. 12 September 2023. New Vietnam-US relationship means more 'strategic' foreign policy. Viet Nam News. Available at <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/what-the-vietnam-us-comprehensive-strategic-partnership->

The US and Vietnam have come a long way to reach the milestone of elevating relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Since normalizing relations back in 1995, the two countries have worked together to overcome differences and forge convergences. The relations met a breakthrough in 2013 when US President Barack Obama and Vietnam's President Truong Tan Sang decided to form the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership in Washington.<sup>7</sup> Another major turn was in 2016 when the US lifted bans on arms sales to Vietnam, marking the full normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries.<sup>8</sup>

The US and Vietnam could have upgraded relations ways earlier but the momentum was not there. Between 2010 and 2013, there were discussions to upgrade relations to a strategic partnership, the second-tier diplomatic ranking.<sup>9</sup> At that time, the desire to upgrade relations to this height was first suggested by Hillary Clinton, then US Secretary of State.<sup>10</sup> However, Vietnam was reluctant because of “concerns about China’s reaction”. Also, the US felt that “a strategic partnership was premature” owing to the fact that Vietnam was still sensitive to stepping up defense cooperation with the US.<sup>11</sup>

Momentum grew again during President Donald Trump's Administration from 2017 to 2021. Vietnam's Prime Minister became the first Southeast Asian leader to be invited to meet Trump at the White House in 2017.<sup>12</sup> Trump attended the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit hosted by Vietnam in Da Nang in November 2017.<sup>13</sup> When he visited Hanoi in 2018, then-Defense Secretary James Mattis stated that the US and Vietnam are “like-minded partners that have a forward-looking relationship”.<sup>14</sup> Trump even invited the General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party Nguyen Phu Trong to visit the US in 2019 although the visit did not materialize as the health of the Secretary General was not in good condition at that time.<sup>15</sup> More

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[means-4652064.html#:~:text=Vietnam%20has%20established%20a%20comprehensive,after%20China%2C%20Russia%20and%20India.](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/23/us-lifts-decades-long-embargo-on-arms-sales-to-vietnam)

<sup>7</sup> The Obama White House. 25 July 2013. Joint Statement by President Barack Obama of the United States of America and President Truong Tan Sang of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Available at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/25/joint-statement-president-barack-obama-united-states-america-and-preside>

<sup>8</sup> Oliver Holmes. 23 May 2016. US lifts decades-long embargo on arms sales to Vietnam. The Guardian. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/23/us-lifts-decades-long-embargo-on-arms-sales-to-vietnam>

<sup>9</sup> Phan Xuan Dung. 12 January 2023. Vietnam's Relations with the United States: Time For an Upgrade. Fulcrum. Available at <https://fulcrum.sg/vietnams-relations-with-the-united-states-time-for-an-upgrade/#:~:text=In%202010%2C%20then%20U.S.%20Secretary,to%20Vietnam%20in%20August%202021.>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer. 31 July 2017. Vietnam's Foreign Policy in an Era of Rising Sino-US Competition and Increasing Domestic Political Influence. Asian Security. Available at DOI: 10.1080/14799855.2017.1354570

<sup>12</sup> Mark Landler. 31 May 2017. Trump Hosts Prime Minister Phuc of Vietnam and Announces Trade Deals. The New York Times. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/31/world/asia/vietnam-nguyen-xuan-phuc-trump.html#:~:text=Trump's%20first%20meeting%20with%20the,fronts%20early%20in%20his%20administration.>

<sup>13</sup> Steve Herman. 11 November 2017. Trump Heads for Hanoi, Meetings With Vietnam's Leaders. Voice of America. Available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/trump-asian-leaders-apec-summit/4110674.html>

<sup>14</sup> Lisa Ferdinando. 25 January 2018. Mattis Calls U.S., Vietnam 'Like-Minded Partners'. Available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1424401/mattis-calls-us-vietnam-like-minded-partners/>

<sup>15</sup> Khanh Lynh. 27 February 2019. President Trump invites Vietnamese counterpart Trong to visit US. Vietnam News Express. Available at <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/trump-kim-summit-vietnam/president-trump-invites-vietnamese-counterpart-trong-to-visit-us-3887333.html>

high-level visits between the two countries took place.<sup>16</sup> There were even some speculations that the US and Vietnam would upgrade relations during the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of normalization of the US-Vietnam relations in 2020 but the elevation did not come to be.<sup>17</sup>

Since President Joe Biden took office in January 2021, the US seems to be more interested in upgrading relations with Vietnam. Six months into the office, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin of the Biden Administration visited Vietnam.<sup>18</sup> The visit was followed by another high-profile visit of Vice President Kamala Harris.<sup>19</sup> Both leaders reiterated a similar message of wanting to upgrade relations with Vietnam.<sup>20</sup> In March 2023, President Biden had a telephone call with Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong to discuss “the importance of strengthening and expanding the bilateral relationship, while working together to address regional challenges such as climate change, ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific, and the deteriorating environmental and security situation along the Mekong”.<sup>21</sup> Both leaders had positive feelings about this telephone call.<sup>22</sup>

Following up on this telephone call, in April 2023, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Vietnam “to further broaden and deepen” the partnership between the US and Vietnam.<sup>23</sup> Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong called Blinken's visit “meaningful” and was confident that the visit “will help consolidate the partnership between Vietnam and the US”.<sup>24</sup>

In June 2023, Le Hoai Trung, Head of the Party Central Committee’s Commission for External Relations of the Vietnamese Communist Party paid a visit to the US. He met various high-level US officials such as US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, and US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry.<sup>25</sup>

On 28 July 2023, President Biden told a fundraiser in Maine that he received a call from the “head of Vietnam” who “desperately wants to meet with me when I go to the G20”. “He wants to elevate us to a major partner, along with Russia and China”, Biden added. Analysts say the US President referred the “head of Vietnam” to Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong whom he spoke via

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<sup>16</sup> U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Vietnam. 2023. CHRONOLOGY OF U.S. – VIETNAM RELATIONS. Available at <https://vn.usembassy.gov/chronology-of-u-s-vietnam-relations/>

<sup>17</sup> Huynh Tam Sang. 10 September 2020. Vietnam Edging Towards America. ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute. Available at [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2020\\_102.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_102.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Associated Press. 29 July 2021. US defense secretary visits Vietnam, vows support for region. Available at <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-government-and-politics-vietnam-1f1651fadd34630d99b154487c826689>

<sup>19</sup> White House. 26 August 2023. Remarks by Vice President Harris in Press Conference in Hanoi, Vietnam. Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/26/remarks-by-vice-president-harris-in-press-conference-in-hanoi-vietnam/>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> White House. 29 March 2023. Readout of President Joe Biden’s call with General Secretary Trong of Vietnam. Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/03/29/readout-of-president-joe-bidens-call-with-general-secretary-trong-of-vietnam/>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> US Mission Vietnam. 20 April 2023. Remarks of Secretary Blinken at the Press Availability. Available at <https://vn.usembassy.gov/remarks-of-secretary-blinken-at-the-press-availability/>

<sup>24</sup> US Department of State. 15 April 2023. Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Vietnamese General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong Before Their Meeting. Available at <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-vietnamese-general-secretary-nguyen-phu-trong-before-their-meeting/>

<sup>25</sup> Van Nguyen. 4 July 2023. Senior Party official and delegation visit US. Available at <https://vneconomy.vn/senior-party-official-and-delegation-visit-us.htm>

telephone back in March. On 8 August, at another fundraising event in New Mexico, Biden said he would travel to Vietnam “shortly” because “the country wanted to elevate the relationship with the United States and become a major partner”.<sup>26</sup> On 28 August, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre confirmed that Biden would visit Vietnam on 10 September and would meet with General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong and other key leaders to “discuss ways to further deepen cooperation between the United States and Vietnam”.<sup>27</sup>

## China Factor

China has been a main focus and factor that fuels this upgrade of relations. Washington Post, for example, headlined Biden’s visit as “Biden visits Vietnam to bolster alliance confronting China”.<sup>28</sup> Politico’s title was “Biden to sign a strategic partnership deal with Vietnam in latest bid to counter China in the region”.<sup>29</sup> The New York Times’s headline was “Biden Forges Deeper Ties With Vietnam as China’s Ambition Mounts”.<sup>30</sup> The Wall Street Journal titled “Biden Seeks Stronger Vietnam Ties in Bid to Counter China”.<sup>31</sup> China’s Global Times articles were entitled “China Confident in Vietnam ties despite US lifting partnership”<sup>32</sup> and “Biden’s high-profile visit to Vietnam ‘symbolic gesture’ with limited outcomes”<sup>33</sup>. In Southeast Asia, Channel News Asia and The Jakarta Post both published an Agence France-Presse (AFP) article entitled “Biden’s Vietnam Trip Aimed at Reining in China”.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike the press in the US, China, and Southeast Asia that made linkages of US-Vietnam elevated relations to China, Vietnam’s media made no such mentions.<sup>35</sup>

During Biden’s press conference in Hanoi, most of the questions asked by reporters were one or the other related to what this newly-elevated US-Vietnam partnership means for China and the

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<sup>26</sup> Nandita Bose. 9 August 2023. Biden says he will visit Vietnam 'shortly'. Reuters. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/biden-says-he-is-going-vietnam-soon-2023-08-09/>

<sup>27</sup> White House. 28 August 2023. Statement by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre on President Biden’s Travel to Vietnam. Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/28/statement-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-on-president-bidens-travel-to-vietnam/>

<sup>28</sup> Matt Viser and Meryl Kornfield. 10 September 2023. Biden visits Vietnam to bolster alliance confronting China. The Washington Post. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/09/10/biden-g20-summit-india-vietnam/>

<sup>29</sup> Phelim Kine. 18 August 2023. Biden to sign strategic partnership deal with Vietnam in latest bid to counter China in the region. Politico. Available at <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/08/18/biden-vietnam-partnership-00111939>

<sup>30</sup> Peter Baker and Katie Rogers. 10 September 2023. Biden Forges Deeper Ties With Vietnam as China’s Ambition Mounts. The New York Time. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/10/us/politics/biden-vietnam-hanoi.html>

<sup>31</sup> Jon Emont, Catherine Luncey and Katy Stech Ferek. 10 September 2023. Biden Seeks Stronger Vietnam Ties in Bid to Counter China. The Wall Street Journal. Available at <https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/biden-seeks-stronger-vietnam-ties-in-bid-to-counter-china-605517df>

<sup>32</sup> Yang Sheng and Zhang Yuying. 11 September 2023. China confident in Vietnam ties despite US lifting partnership. Global Times. Available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202309/1298014.shtml>

<sup>33</sup> Chen Qingqing and Ma Jingjing. 10 September 2023. Biden’s high-profile visit to Vietnam ‘symbolic gesture’ with limited outcomes. Global Times. Available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202309/1297929.shtml>

<sup>34</sup> Agence France-Presse. 8 September 2023. Biden’s Vietnam trip aimed at reining in China. Jakarta Post. Available at <https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2023/09/08/bidens-vietnam-trip-aimed-at-reining-in-china.html>

<sup>35</sup> Nhân Dân. 12 September 2023. US President's Vietnam visit spotlighted. Available at <https://en.nhandan.vn/us-presidents-vietnam-visit-spotlighted-post129315.html>



overall US-China competition, and less so about the actual substances of US-Vietnam relations.<sup>36</sup> This is understandable given the ongoing US-China intensified competition which analysts tend to view situations through the lens of the superpowers, particularly the US and China.<sup>37</sup> The views are not entirely incorrect because the US and China are the two most powerful countries in terms of powers such as economy, military, and diplomatic networks.<sup>38</sup> Many parts of the world including Southeast Asia are directly and indirectly impacted by relations between superpowers such as US and China.<sup>39</sup>

Both the US and Vietnam have a converged concern for China, particularly its actions in the South China Sea and the Mekong subregion. For the Biden Administration, China is the “most serious” competitor that presents “mounting challenges” to its regional and global interests as noted in its latest Indo-Pacific Strategy in March 2022.<sup>40</sup> For Vietnam, it is “arguably more exposed to China than any other country”.<sup>41</sup> China’s overlapped claims and subsequent assertive actions in the South China Sea and the Mekong directly impacted on Vietnam’s security interests.<sup>42</sup>

Due to this converged concern, in the US-Vietnam Joint Leaders’ Statement, the two sides made explicit points on the issues of the South China Sea and the Mekong subregion, understandably without referencing China. The two leaders noted:

“The Leaders underscored their unwavering support for the peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international law, without the threat or use of force, as well as freedom of navigation and overflight and unimpeded lawful commerce in the South China Sea, respect for sovereignty, and for sovereign rights and jurisdiction of coastal states over their exclusive economic zones and continental shelves in accordance with the international law of the sea as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. The Leaders recognized the importance of the full and effective implementation of the 2002 Declaration of the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in its entirety, and reaffirmed their support for ASEAN efforts to conclude an effective and substantive Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, one that is in accordance with international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS and does not prejudice the rights of any state under international law”.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Forbes Breaking News. 10 September 2023. President Biden Holds Press Briefing In Hanoi, Vietnam | Full. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dy9pD0mPXAc>

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Stromseth. October 2019. Don’t make us choose: Southeast Asia in the throes of US-China rivalry. Brookings. Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/dont-make-us-choose-southeast-asia-in-the-throes-of-us-china-rivalry/>

<sup>38</sup> According to Lowy Institute Asia Power Index 2023 Edition, US ranks number 1 and China ranks number 2. This index takes into account countries’ weighed average across measures of power including economic capability, military capability, resilience, future resources, economic relationships, defence networks, diplomatic influence, cultural influence. See: Lowy Institute. 2023. Lowy Institute Asia Power Index 2023 Edition. Available at <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/>

<sup>39</sup> Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall. 2005. Power in International Politics. International Organization. Vol.59, No.1, pp. 39-75. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3877878>

<sup>40</sup> White House. February 2022. Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States. Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Huong Le Thu. 12 September 2023. Hanoi’s American Hedge. Foreign Affairs. Available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/hanoi-american-hedge>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> White House. 11 September 2023. Joint Leaders’ Statement: Elevating United States-Vietnam Relations To A Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements->

“The two Leaders underscored the critical importance of the Mekong sub-region in maintaining stability, peace, prosperity, cooperation, and sustainable development. Transboundary cooperation and sustainable development are crucial as the two countries jointly address new challenges and opportunities including food security and sustainable water management, supporting communities and their livelihoods, promoting economic connectivity, tackling non-traditional security issues, and working to provide opportunities for human resource development”.<sup>44</sup>

## **Partnership, Not Alignment**

Although there is evidence of a converged concern between the US and Vietnam on China, there are also other considerable elements that are at play, leading to the elevation of the relationship between the US and Vietnam. As mentioned in the preceding paragraph, the US has been a “more eager party” for this relationship elevation. Therefore, Vietnam held an important key to this upgrade.<sup>45</sup> Until March this year, there were still reports of hesitations from the Vietnam side to upgrade relations with the US.<sup>46</sup>

Vietnam is likely to seek from the US an understanding that any elevation would mean more partnership between the US and Vietnam, not Vietnam’s alignment with the US. This understanding is likely to be reached which paved the way for the upgrade of relations.

These points were echoed again after the Biden-Trong meeting. In the Leaders’ Joint Statement, the elevation of relations from “Comprehensive Partnership” to “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Peace, Cooperation and Sustainable Development”.<sup>47</sup> The emphasis, while symbolic, has a meaning that this relationship will not go beyond these three purposes of promoting peace, cooperation, and sustainable development.

Despite the elevation, Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong stated that “Vietnam's consistent foreign policy focuses on independence, self-reliance, peace, friendship, cooperation and development, diversification and multilateralization of foreign relations; being proactive and active in comprehensive international integration”.<sup>48</sup> He also emphasized “Vietnam adheres to the "four nos" defense policy, which means no partaking in military alliances, no siding with one country to act against another, no foreign military bases in the Vietnamese territory or using

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[releases/2023/09/11/joint-leaders-statement-elevating-united-states-vietnam-relations-to-a-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/11/joint-leaders-statement-elevating-united-states-vietnam-relations-to-a-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/)

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Francesco Guarascio. 23 March 2023. Vietnam may resist diplomatic upgrade with Washington as U.S.-China tensions simmer. Reuters. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/vietnam-may-resist-diplomatic-upgrade-with-washington-us-china-tensions-simmer-2023-03-23/>

<sup>47</sup> White House. 11 September 2023. Joint Leaders’ Statement: Elevating United States-Vietnam Relations To A Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/11/joint-leaders-statement-elevating-united-states-vietnam-relations-to-a-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>

<sup>48</sup> Nhu Tam. 10 September 2023. Vietnam, US establish Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Vietnam Express. Available at <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnam-us-establish-comprehensive-strategic-partnership-4651610.html>

Vietnam as leverage to counteract other countries, and no using force or threatening to use force in international relations”.<sup>49</sup>

As Huong Le Thu rightly points out,

“Vietnam’s agreement with the Biden administration should be seen as an important step forward in bilateral ties, bringing enormous benefits to Hanoi. But it is not an arrangement that is likely to change the Vietnamese government’s fundamental orientation.”<sup>50</sup>

Also, as Nguyen Hung Son pointedly observes,

“Vietnam’s ultimate purpose for the upgrade of diplomatic ties with partners across the board, including with the U.S., is to stiffen its network of relationships, and to enhance its resilience and strength in a world of growing uncertainty”.<sup>51</sup>

It should be noted that this elevation is in no ways exclusive. As noted above, Vietnam has other 4 countries that had already been upgraded to Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships including China, Russia, India and Republic of Korea. Vietnam plans to raise ties to this top level with Australia<sup>52</sup> and Singapore.<sup>53</sup>

In addition, Vietnam is not likely to be on board with the US on every issue regarding China. As immediate neighbor with asymmetrical power and long history of conflicts and mistrust, Vietnam has been careful in dealing with China not be seen as a balancing force against it.<sup>54</sup> As Phuong Vu observes,

“Hanoi is all too aware of the range of coercive instruments that Beijing has to employ against it, which include maritime actions in the South China Sea, trade and investment sanctions, and hacking and cyber warfare, to say nothing of its control of the headwaters

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Huong Le Thu. 12 September 2023. Hanoi’s American Hedge. Foreign Affairs. Available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/hanoi-american-hedge>

<sup>51</sup> Nguyen Hung Son. 14 September 2023. The US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Is Not All About China. The Diplomat. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/the-u-s-vietnam-comprehensive-strategic-partnership-is-not-all-about-china/>

<sup>52</sup> Duc Trung. 22 August 2023. Vietnam, Australia agree to 'comprehensive strategic partnership'. VNExpress. Available at <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnam-australia-agree-to-comprehensive-strategic-partnership-4644824.html#:~:text=Vietnam%20Australia%20agree%20to%20'comprehensive%20strategic%20partnership'.By%20Duc%20Trung&text=Vietnamese%20Minister%20of%20Foreign%20Affairs, strategic%20partnership%20in%20Hanoi%20Tuesday.>

<sup>53</sup> Lien Hoang. 28 August 2023. Vietnam weighs Singapore diplomatic upgrade as Lee visits. Nikkei Asia. Available at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Vietnam-weighs-Singapore-diplomatic-upgrade-as-Lee-visits>

<sup>54</sup> Nghia L. Nguyen. 3 May 2023. Vietnam and China: Conflicting neighbors stuck in nationalism and memory. Harvard International Review. Available at <https://hir.harvard.edu/vietnam-and-china-conflicting-neighbors-stuck-in-nationalism-and-memory/>; Mimi Lau. 25 August 2021. Vietnam says it will not side against China, as US’ Kamala Harris visits. South China Morning Post. Available at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3146273/vietnam-says-it-will-not-side-against-china-us-kamala-harris>



of the Mekong and Red rivers which give it considerable power to alleviate both floods and droughts in Vietnam”.<sup>55</sup>

Days before Biden’s visit to Vietnam, Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong and Chinese Ambassador to Vietnam Xiao Bo visited China-Vietnam Friendship Pass.<sup>56</sup> On 6 September 2023, Trong also met with Liu Jianchao, Head of the International Department of the Communist Party of China, to enhance “political trust”.<sup>57</sup>

Three days after the upgrade of relations with the US, Politburo Member of the Vietnamese Communist Party and Public Security Minister To Lam met in Beijing with Cai Qi who is a high-level official of the Communist Party of China. To Lam also met with Chinese State Councillor and Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong and Commander of the People’s Armed Police Wang Chunling. While this might be entirely functional and long-planned, the message of “Vietnam’s Continued Balancing Act”<sup>58</sup> is there.

### **Domestic Political Consideration in Vietnam**

Besides strategic calculation, the domestic political consideration is also part of the equation for the two parties in upgrading the relations to the highest level. As noted in the earlier section, at least for the past three US Administrations have evidently and consistently encouraged an upgrade of relations with Vietnam. Hanoi, even until recently, had repeatedly hesitated to do so despite substantive cooperation with Washington. The strategic calculation is certainly an important driver but the domestic political consideration, especially in Vietnam, is likely to be among the deciding factors that tip the scale for Hanoi to agree with Washington to elevate relations from the third-tier Comprehensive Partnership straight to the first-tier Comprehensive Strategic Partnership by skipping the second-tier Strategic Partnership.

General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party Nguyen Phu Trong has the intention to enhance his legitimacy at home, especially during the current complexity of the geopolitical and domestic political landscape.

The state visit by President Joe Biden to Vietnam signaled the US’ respect for Vietnam’s political system and especially the legitimacy of the Vietnamese Communist Party, according to the Party’s

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<sup>55</sup> Phuong Vu. 2 March 2022. What’s in a Name: The Promise and Peril of a US-Vietnam ‘Strategic Partnership’. The Diplomat. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/whats-in-a-name-the-promise-and-peril-of-a-u-s-vietnam-strategic-partnership/>

<sup>56</sup> Khang Vu. 11 September 2023. Overcoming Differences, Looking to the Future: The Next Step for the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. The Diplomat. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/overcoming-differences-looking-to-the-future-the-next-step-for-the-us-vietnam-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>

<sup>57</sup> Albee Zhang and Ryan Woo. 6 September 2023. China boosts 'political trust' with Vietnam ahead of Biden visit. Reuters. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-boosts-political-trust-with-vietnam-ahead-biden-visit-2023-09-06/>

<sup>58</sup> Le Hong Heip. 30 May 2017. Vietnam’s Continued Balancing Act. Fulcrum. Available at <https://fulcrum.sg/vietnams-continued-balancing-act-by-le-hong-heip/>

official newspaper, Nhân Dân.<sup>59</sup> It should be noted that Biden's visit was at the invitation of Nguyen Phu Trong, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam.<sup>60</sup> It is observed that Trong emphasized his legacy in leapfrogging the elevation of the partnership with the US. Both the Party and the State's media lauded that:

“The visit marked the first time the President of the United States paid a state visit at the invitation of the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, and the first time both the President and Vice President of the United States visited Vietnam in one term.”<sup>61</sup>

Nguyen Phu Trong became the General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party in 2011. In 2021, he was elected to become the Party Secretary in an unprecedented third term.<sup>62</sup> During his term, some analysts viewed that Trong had consolidated power in Vietnamese politics through a harsh corruption campaign that saw around 7,500 individuals under criminal charges, while former Vietnam President, Nguyen Xuan Phuc and two Former Deputy Prime Ministers were forced to resign in late 2022 and early 2023.<sup>63</sup>

With such a political turbulent, to cement his legacy, Trong needs to maintain domestic political stability through various means, including sophisticated diplomacy. Nguyen Phu Trong is now 79, and it is not certain that he will go on to work as the General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party for another term, owing to his old age as the next Party Congress is due in 2026.<sup>64</sup> In conducting relations with the US, it is not an easy lane for Vietnam even this Southeast Asian country is growing strategic importance for the US since the US still aims to promote democratic and human rights value in its foreign policy.<sup>65</sup> The US usually criticized Vietnam's human rights records, especially when this socialist state arrested rights activists.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Nhân Dân. 10 September 2023. Bringing Vietnam-US relations to a new stage, for peace and development [Vietnamese Language]. Available at <https://nhandan.vn/dua-quan-he-viet-nam-hoa-ky-sang-giai-doan-moi-vi-hoa-binh-va-phat-trien-post771706.html>

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Tomoya Onishi. 31 January 2021. Vietnam general secretary Trong elected to unprecedented 3rd term. Nikkei Asian Review. Available at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Vietnam-general-secretary-Trong-elected-to-unprecedented-3rd-term>

<sup>63</sup> Nguyen Khac Giang. 27 February 2023. Nguyen Phu Trong's Dominance in Vietnamese politics: Far-reaching Implications. Fulcrum. Available at <https://fulcrum.sg/nguyen-phu-trongs-dominance-in-vietnamese-politics-far-reaching-implications/>; Tomoya Onishi. 6 January 2023. Vietnam's Trong consolidates power with dismissals of deputy PMs. Nikkei Asian Review. Available at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Vietnam-s-Trong-consolidates-power-with-dismissals-of-deputy-PMs>; Nguyen Khac Giang. 18 May 2023. Vietnam's Anti-corruption Campaign: Economic and Political Impacts. ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute. Available at <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2023-41-vietnams-anti-corruption-campaign-economic-and-political-impacts-by-nguyen-khac-giang/>

<sup>64</sup> Nguyen Khac Giang. 27 February 2023. Nguyen Phu Trong's Dominance in Vietnamese politics: Far-reaching Implications. Fulcrum. Available at <https://fulcrum.sg/nguyen-phu-trongs-dominance-in-vietnamese-politics-far-reaching-implications/>

<sup>65</sup> Lucas Myers. 12 September 2023. The Comprehensive Part of the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. The Wilson Center. Available at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/comprehensive-part-us-vietnam-comprehensive-strategic-partnership>; Joshua Kurlantzick and Abigail McGowan. 11 September 2023. Assessing the Bolstered U.S.-Vietnam Relationship. Council on Foreign Relations. Available at <https://www.cfr.org/blog/assessing-bolstered-us-vietnam-relationship>.

<sup>66</sup> Department of State, US. 25 August 2022. The Upheld Conviction of Pham Doan Trang. Available at <https://www.state.gov/the-upheld-conviction-of-pham-doan-trang/>; Reuters. 14 April 2023. Hours before Blinken

Nevertheless, under Trong's watch, he witnessed two important milestones. The first was the upgrade of relations with the US to the Comprehensive Partnership in 2013. The second was the recent elevation by two diplomatic rankings to the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Therefore, it is likely that Trong would claim deepening relations with the US as one of his legacies, concretizing his mandate as the Premier Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam. This demonstrates the contribution of Trong to the Vietnamese Communist Party's "performance-based" legitimacy<sup>67</sup> in continuing to govern Vietnam.

## Conclusion

To recapitulate, the elevation of US-Vietnam relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership symbolizes the two countries' commitment to turn a new chapter of their heightened ties. The process of this historic upgrade has been long and cumbersome. Yet, the converged concern on China along with a shared understanding of the nature of partnership as well as the domestic political consideration, especially in Vietnam, have all played roles in overcoming pre-existing hesitations and finally making this elevation possible nearly 30 years after the two countries normalized their relations. This diplomatic milestone and its whole process show Vietnam's astute diplomacy in cautiously treading its relations with superpowers amidst uncertain regional and global security landscapes. The next important but difficult step is how Vietnam maintains and further capitalizes on this hard-earned momentum.

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visit, US condemns Vietnam's jailing of activist. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/hours-before-blinken-visit-us-condemns-vietnams-jailing-activist-2023-04-13/>.

<sup>67</sup> Le Hong Hiep. August 2012. Performance-based Legitimacy: The Case of the Communist Party of Vietnam and "Doi Moi". Contemporary Southeast Asia. ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41756339>.