

# US forges closer military ties with Vietnam

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Washington has recently taken several steps to boost its military relationship with Vietnam as part of a broader Obama administration strategy aimed at undermining Chinese influence in East and South East Asia.

Last week, the two countries held their first-ever defence dialogue in Hanoi. At a joint press conference on August 17, US Deputy Assistant Defence Secretary Robert Scher declared that the talks represented “the next significant historic step in our increasingly robust defence relationship”. Previous security talks, which began in 2008, were conducted by the US State Department and Vietnamese foreign ministry, rather than defence officials.

While nominally the topics involved marine security and international peace keeping, both sides obviously discussed China’s military presence in the region. “I did share at our meeting our impressions of Chinese military modernisation,” Scher told reporters. Last week, the Pentagon released its annual report to Congress, expressing concerns about China’s military expansion and warning that its “limited transparency... increases the potential for misunderstanding and miscalculation”.

The dialogue followed provocative comments by the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at an Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) regional forum in Hanoi last month. Clinton declared that the US had “a national interest” in ensuring “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea. Her remarks cut across China’s claims to sovereignty over much of the South China Sea. Earlier this year, Beijing told senior US officials that the maritime area constituted one of China’s “core interests,” like Taiwan and Tibet.

Clinton also intruded into the longstanding territorial disputes in the South China Sea between China and ASEAN countries, including Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines. She offered “to facilitate initiatives and confidence-building measures” aimed at establishing an international code of conduct. Washington’s “offer” was aimed at undermining Beijing’s efforts to settle the disputes on a bilateral or regional basis, and provoked an angry reaction from Chinese officials.

Prior to the US-Vietnam security dialogue, the huge aircraft carrier, the USS George Washington, and several destroyers arrived off the Vietnamese coast—ostensibly to mark 15 years since the normalisation of relations between the US and Vietnam in 1995. On August 8, US naval officers hosted a delegation of Vietnamese military and government officials, who flew out to the aircraft carrier.

As both sides were well aware, the real purpose of the exercise was to forcefully underscore US claims to “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea. Speaking to reporters as US warplanes took off from the deck, Captain David Lausman, commander of the USS George Washington, declared: “These waters belong to nobody, yet belong to everybody. China has a right to operate here, as do we and as do every country of the world.”

Two days later, on August 10, the USS John S. McCain, a guided missile destroyer, docked at Da Nang in Vietnam to conduct the first-ever joint military exercises with the Vietnamese navy. The US described the program as a “series of naval engagement activities” focussing mainly on non-combat training, such as damage control and search and rescue. US and Vietnamese naval vessels did not operate together at sea, but the exercise was clearly a step in that direction.

Last month the US navy held large-scale joint operations with South Korea in the Sea of Japan, to the east of the Korean Peninsula, in which the USS George Washington was involved. The exercise was in part a show of force after the sinking of the South Korean warship, the Cheonan, in March, allegedly by North Korea. While the war games were moved from the Yellow Sea after Beijing’s protests, the Pentagon has since announced the further joint naval exercises in coming months with South Korea in this sensitive area close to the Chinese mainland.

Commentaries in the Chinese press clearly expressed Beijing’s concerns regarding what one columnist described as the “Pentagon’s gunboat policy”. Another column in the state-owned *People’s Daily* by Li Hongmei, headlined “Vietnam advisable not to play with fire,” warned: “Vietnam’s actions now are very selfish... It might well overestimate the capacity of

Uncle Sam's protective umbrella. It is advisable for Vietnam to give up the illusion it can do what it likes in the South China Sea under the protection of the US Navy. Should China and Vietnam truly come into military clashes, no aircraft carrier of any country can ensure it will remain secure."

Like governments throughout the region, the Stalinist regime in Vietnam is engaged in a delicate balancing game amid the growing rivalry between China and the US. Visiting Beijing this week, Vietnam's vice defence minister, General Nguyen Chi Vinh played down ties with the US and described China as "a good friend of Vietnam". China and Vietnam have already established military relations. Since 2006, the two countries have held at least nine joint naval patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin. Vietnam has hosted three port calls by the Chinese navy this year.

Nevertheless, there remains considerable suspicion and rivalry between the two countries. With the support of the US, China launched a devastating border war against Vietnam in 1979 aimed at undermining the regime, which had just ousted China's ally Pol Pot in neighbouring Cambodia. China and Vietnam clashed in 1988 over their disputed claims to the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

Despite the bitter legacy of US imperialism's war in Vietnam until 1975, Hanoi has had no scruples about developing closer economic and strategic relations with Washington. Having transformed the country into a cheap labour platform, the Vietnamese regime is reliant on the US as its top export market and source of foreign investment. Over the past year, the two countries have been negotiating a nuclear deal that would pave the way for US corporations to construct nuclear power plants in Vietnam, which already faces energy shortages.

While cautious not to offend Beijing, Hanoi has been forging closer defence ties with the US. Defence analyst Carlyle Thayer writing in the *Wall Street Journal* on August 19 observed: "Vietnam started last year to engage in a very delicate game of signalling that it views an American military presence in the region as legitimate. Last year, for example, Vietnamese military officials flew to the USS John C. Stennis to observe flight operations in the South China Sea. Later that year, Vietnamese Defence Minister Phung Quang Thanh stopped off at Pacific Command in Hawaii on his way to Washington and was photographed peering through the periscope of a US nuclear submarine. The cooperation intensified this year when Vietnamese shipyards repaired two US Military Sealift Command ships."

Vietnam clearly calculates that closer US ties will provide it with greater bargaining power in its disputes with China in the South China Sea. A US Congressional Research Service paper

on US-Vietnam relations published last month noted: "Vietnam reportedly intends to use its chairmanship of ASEAN in 2010 to 'internationalise' the disputes by forming a multi-country negotiation forum which would force China to negotiate in a multilateral setting. Vietnamese officials have begun to ask their US counterparts more frequently and with greater intensity whether the United States will support Vietnamese efforts to combat what they see as China's encroachment in the South China Sea. In a news conference releasing the Vietnamese Defence Ministry 2009 White Paper, Deputy Defence Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh [the same general who is now in China] said that sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea have created 'concerns and new challenges for Vietnamese national defence.'"

At last month's ASEAN forum, Clinton clearly answered Vietnam's appeals for US backing in the South China Sea in the affirmative. She also declared that the Obama administration was prepared "to take the US-Vietnam relationship to the next level"—as has now been rapidly demonstrated by the first security dialogue and first joint naval exercise between the two countries.

While Vietnam is looking for US backing in its disputes with China, the US is engaged in a far broader and more dangerous strategy of forging and strengthening alliances and security arrangements with a string of countries around China's borders—from Japan and South Korea in North East Asia to Vietnam, the Philippines, Singapore and Australia, through to India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

The South China Sea, however, has a particular strategic significance as the main sea-lane through which China ships the bulk of its energy imports from the Middle East and Africa. Since the end of World War II, a key element of American strategic thinking has been to ensure naval control over key "choke points" such as the Strait of Malacca, thus holding a trump card over its potential rivals, including China and Japan, in the event of war. Washington's determination to hold on to its advantage is thus a direct threat to China, with the potential to further inflame the tense relations between the two major powers.



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