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**50 years of the Paris Peace
Accords: Vietnam is another
country**

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50 years of the Paris Peace Accords: Vietnam is another country

Abstract:

This 2023 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Paris Peace Accords that marked the end of the Vietnam War and the departure of US troops. Vietnam is a very different state than it was then, even though the all-powerful Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), created by Ho Chi Minh in 1930, continues to rule. The hastily liberalised economy, which has made this Southeast Asian state a centre of attraction for multinational companies, has been followed by an increase in precariousness indices and a perception of widespread corruption. Precisely, due to some corruption scandals, in January the then president Xuan Phuc resigned and was replaced by a younger Van Thuon. The latter has the support of the true leader of Vietnam: the general secretary of the CPV, Phu Trong, in office since 2011. On the country's horizon, Trong's succession and its complicated geopolitical situation, given the conflict in the current Indo-Pacific, where Vietnam oscillates between friction and dependence on China and the commercial or security rapprochement with the United States, its former enemy.

Keywords:

Vietnam, China, Indo-Pacific, Southeast Asia, ASEAN, United States.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the *Analysis Papers* are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

50 años de los Acuerdos de paz de París: Vietnam es otro país

Resumen:

Este 2023 se cumplen cincuenta años de los Acuerdos de Paz de París que supusieron el fin de la guerra de Vietnam y la salida de las tropas estadounidenses. Vietnam es un Estado muy diferente al de entonces, aunque siga gobernando el todopoderoso Partido Comunista de Vietnam (PCV), creado por Ho Chi Minh en 1930. A una economía liberalizada a toda prisa, que ha hecho de este Estado del Sudeste Asiático un centro de atracción para las empresas multinacionales, le han seguido un incremento de los índices de precariedad y una percepción de corrupción generalizada. Precisamente, debido a algunos escándalos de corrupción, en enero dimitía el entonces presidente Xuan Phuc, sustituido por un más joven Van Thuon. Este último cuenta con el apoyo del auténtico líder de Vietnam: el secretario general del PCV, Phu Trong, en el cargo desde 2011. En el horizonte del país, la sucesión de Trong y su complicada situación geopolítica, dada la conflictividad del actual Indopacífico, donde Vietnam oscila entre las fricciones y la dependencia respecto a China y el acercamiento comercial o en materia de seguridad a Estados Unidos, su antaño enemigo.

Palabras clave:

Vietnam, China, Indopacífico, Sudeste Asiático, ASEAN, Estados Unidos.

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The Americans speak of the *Vietnam War*, the Vietnamese of the *American War*. This distinction is perhaps what explains the cause of that war.

KIM THÚY, *Em*

Introduction

This past 27 January marked the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords. The treaty ended a long and devastating war, saw the departure of US troops from Vietnam and recognised the country's imminent reunification. The date is remembered in Vietnam as the diplomatic milestone that enshrined the country's independence following a bloody history of colonialism and devastation. For this reason, and because they represented the achievement of the political and cultural legacy of Ho Chi Minh, the leader of the contemporary Vietnamese nation who died in 1969, the accords confirmed North Vietnam's triumph and the definitive self-determination of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam with respect to foreign powers within the framework of the United Nations. However, far from the traditional festivities celebrated in the country, this year's anniversary was rather muted, with just a few conferences and exhibitions. Why?¹

Vietnam is a very different country from the one that emerged from the decades of wars against the French and Americans. It is true that, after final reunification in 1975 following two years of civil war – no less dramatic than the one that began in 1954 against the French and Americans – the country was politically shaped, until the present day, along similar lines to China. The Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) set itself up as the representative of the Vietnamese people and took over all the levers of the state and, in general, the life of the country.

However, the first years of reconstruction of a country devastated by war and led by Ho Chi Minh's successors – who, like him, had participated in the wars – were followed by a generation of Party leaders who sought to modernise Vietnam. They followed political orthodoxy but liberalised the economy, in the hope of achieving growth in line with that of

¹ VNA. "Activities to mark the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Paris Peace Accords", *Vietnam Plus*. 31 January 2023. Available at: <https://es.vietnamplus.vn/celebran-actividades-por-50-aniversario-de-la-firma-de-acuerdos-de-paz-de-paris/172417.vnp> [accessed: 06/03/2023].

some neighbouring countries (China, in particular) and opening the nation up to the outside world—an intention that symbolically materialised with its entry into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995. Vietnam has become one of the more developed countries in the area, but with inequalities and poverty, which is paradoxical in an officially communist state.²



Figure 1. Updated map of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and its main urban centres and communication routes.
 Source: Economist Intelligence Unit

Political degradation in Vietnam is also explained by its corruption levels. Last January, President Nguyen Xuan Phuc was forced to resign from office following a spate of other resignations of ministers and senior officials after the uncovering of scandals about

² Vietnam is ranked 115th in the latest United Nations *Human Development Report* which measures factors such as life expectancy, literacy and poverty. It falls within the group of countries with high human development, above other Southeast Asian nations such as the Philippines (116th), Laos (140th), Cambodia (146th) and Myanmar (149th), but below other states such as Thailand (66th). Cfr. UNDP. *Human Development Report*. 2022. Available at: <https://report.hdr.undp.org/es/intro/> [accessed: 06/03/2023].

fraudulent contracts and flights during pandemic lockdowns. All indications are that the cascade of ousted officials is part of an anti-corruption campaign led by the seventy-eight-year-old Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, as well as political score-settling under the guise of anti-corruption measures. Trong has held the country's top post since 2011, which he held along with the presidency between October 2018 and April 2021, precisely when he was replaced by Phuc.³

On 2 March, the National Assembly elected fifty-two-year-old Vo Van Thuong (the youngest member of the Politburo) as president. In his inauguration speech, he emphasised the fight against corruption since, as the former head of the Central Committee's internal affairs, he had been the main person responsible for this issue at the national level.⁴ According to the Corruption Perceptions Index 2021, Vietnam is among the countries that have made the greatest improvement in eradicating corruption compared to 2021, but still remains at worrying levels.⁵

Phu Trong, faced with the scandals that have emerged, has launched an anti-corruption campaign among party and state officials, in a move comparable to that in China, where the expeditious anti-corruption measures implemented by Xi Jinping since 2014 also conceal a form of purge related to political tenets that pit different factions within the party against each other.⁶

³ EUROPA PRESS. "Vo Van Thuong, Vietnam's new president after the resignation of his predecessor". 02 March 2023. Available at: <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-vo-van-thuong-nuevo-presidente-vietnam-dimision-antecesor-cargo-20230302062531.html> [accessed: 07/03/2023].

⁴ For more information, cf. VNA. "Vo Van Thuong elected president of Vietnam", *Vietnam Plus*. 02 March 2023. Available at: <https://es.vietnamplus.vn/vo-van-thuong-elegido-presidente-de-vietnam/173661.vnp> [accessed: 06/03/2023].

⁵ Indeed, Vietnam appears in the mid-level in the perception of corruption, with a notable improvement, according to the annual report prepared by the NGO Transparency International. The country is a few points behind China but ahead of other states in the region that already appear in the area of greatest concern. Cfr. TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL. *Corruption Perceptions Index 2022*. 2023. Available at: https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/Report_CPI2022_English.pdf [accessed: 07/03/2023].

⁶ On Xi Jinping's fight against corruption, cfr. GONZÁLEZ MARTÍN, Andrés. "Xi Jinping, a man on a mission within a destiny" (Analysis Paper, No. 6). IEEE, 2023. Available at: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2023/DIEEEA06_2023_ANDGON_China.pdf [accessed: 04/03/2023].



Figure 2. Vietnam's new President Vo Van Thuong taking the oath of office before the National Assembly on 2 March.

Source: Vietnam Plus.

In foreign policy, the 1973 Paris Peace Accords were signed by a very different Vietnam than today. In fact, the current relationship with the United States, the bitter enemy of that time, is not only a far cry from that era, but has taken a radical turn. Today the US is one of Vietnam's main commercial and economic partners, as well as one of its champions in the always complicated relationship with its neighbour China. For the United States, Vietnam is a containment partner for China, but the war with Vietnam also represents a traumatic memory for US society itself. Even today, coincidences between different times and events are used to give some explanation to what is happening as some media did in comparing the withdrawal from Vietnam to the withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021.⁷

The party takes back the reins

In Vietnam, the General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party is the most important post, above the state offices of prime minister and president. The general secretary ultimately controls all other posts and bodies of both the political organisation itself and the state. Vietnam follows a "four pillar" system where the positions of VCP general secretary, president, prime minister and National Assembly speaker are the pillars on which the regime is built. These positions have been held by different

⁷ HERRING, George C. "Lessons from Vietnam on leaving Afghanistan", *Foreign Affairs*. 15 April 2019. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-04-15/lessons-vietnam-leaving-afghanistan> [accessed: 07/03/2023].

individuals, with exceptions such as Trong between 2018 and 2021. The new president, Thuong, has held various positions within the party, but no state posts of note until now. He is close to Trong, aligned with his views and with Trong's decision on whether to continue as VCP general secretary—Trong is already in his third term and may resign before the next party congress scheduled for 2026.⁸

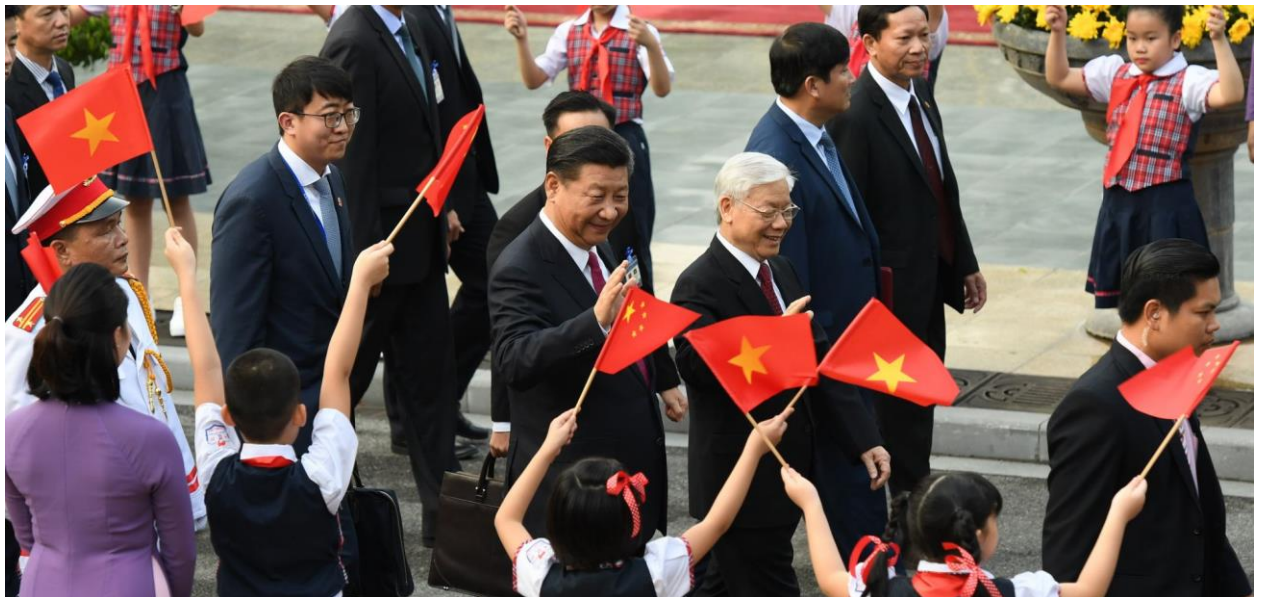


Figure 3. General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Nguyen Phu Trong, received by Chinese President Xi Jinping in November 2022.
 Source: Stratfor Worldview.

The death in 2018 of President Tran Dai Quang, who was responsible for the crackdown on dissent when he was Minister of Public Security, brought with it the loss of a champion for the country's economic opening and also a certain distancing from China. Vietnam's course entered a period of relative uncertainty until the COVID-19 crisis in 2021, when the unknowns became more acute. Against all odds, Vietnam maintained solid economic growth, which enabled it to cope with the pandemic with some assurance, and economic relations with regional partners and other countries were strengthened.⁹

⁸ SEN, Joydeep. "New Vietnam president strengthens party leader's hand". Oxford Analytica, 2 March 2023. Available at: <https://dailybrief.oxan.com/Analysis/ES276461/New-Vietnam-president-strengthens-party-leaders-hand> [accessed: 07/03/2023].

⁹ DW. "Vietnam's President Tran Dai Quang dies at the age of 61". 21 September 2018. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/es/a-los-61-a%C3%B1os-muere-el-presidente-de-vietnam-tran-dai-quang/a-45587230> [accessed: 07/03/2023].

However, Vietnam's rapid modernisation over the last decade, with the adoption of pro-free market policies and investments by multinational companies, also meant that Vietnamese society perceived a clear ideological difference between what the party stood for and the actual actions of the executive. This was a priority issue for the VCP, because of the threat posed by the loss of prestige and the loss of control over the political and economic direction of the country. This is precisely what Trong seems to want to avoid by reasserting his authority over both the party and the state, sending a clear message of accountability to government officials and civil servants, thus subjecting them more strictly to his supervision.¹⁰

Low-cost economy and foreign companies

Economic liberalisation dominates Vietnam's agenda. Paradoxically, while the government's role in the socio-political control of the Vietnamese population is increasing, it is being reduced in large sectors of the economy in favour of greater foreign investment. The previous government of President Phu, a staunch supporter of Western partnerships, had signed a free trade agreement with the European Union (EU) in 2020.¹¹ Also, after the fiasco of the US exit from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in 2017, which dealt a blow to Vietnam's expectations, Vietnam has become a very active member of the new Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which includes China but not the US, as of January 2022. Vietnam has thus become a key partner for robust supply chains in Southeast Asia, while seeing its exports grow exponentially.¹²

¹⁰ ONISHI, Tomoya. "Vietnam's Trong consolidates power with dismissal of deputy prime ministers", *Financial Times*. 12 January 2023. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/16a765ef-cdc7-4439-acaf-8d4beb17fd28> [accessed: 09/03/2023].

¹¹ EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT. "Parliament approves EU-Vietnam free trade and investment protection deals". 6 February 2020. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/es/headlines/priorities/globalizacion/20200206IPR72012/aprobados-los-acuerdos-de-libre-comercio-y-proteccion-de-inversiones-ue-vietnam> [accessed: 08/03/2023].

¹² VNA. "RCEP will improve Vietnam's access to major consumer markets, says Standard Charter Bank". *Bilaterals.org*, 17 May 2022. Available at: <https://www.bilaterals.org/?rcep-mejorara-acceso-de-vietnam-a&lang=en> [accessed: 06/03/2023].

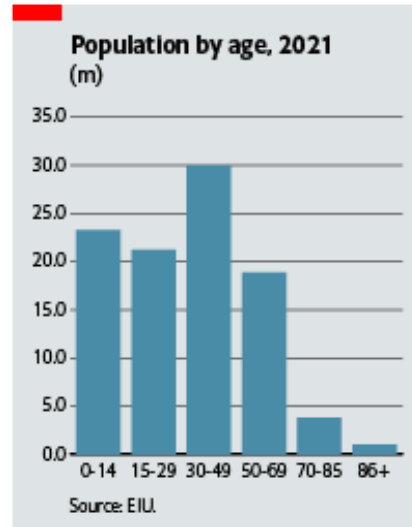


Figure 4. In 2021, the young population cohort aged 15-50 was the majority in Vietnamese society: a workforce for the country's economic development.
 Source: Economist Intelligence Unit.

The liberalisation of the Vietnamese economy by leaps and bounds has other consequences, such as the attractive offer of production tools to foreign companies – especially technology companies – mainly in the form of land for factories, skilled labour and extensive tax benefits. Recently Apple, which in 2020 had already moved the production of some devices to Vietnam as a result of trade frictions between the United States and China, announced the relocation of its smartwatch and laptop factory, thus diversifying its production so as not to depend too much on the Asian giant.¹³ This initiative has been followed by other technology companies, such as Google (US) and Samsung (South Korea),

The establishment of foreign companies in Vietnam has another double effect. Firstly, there is a need for sufficient infrastructure to meet the growing export volumes and the consequent maintenance, transport and supply requirements.¹⁴ In addition, labour becomes another issue at the centre of the debate in Vietnamese society. If they deteriorate further, there is a risk of conflict in the streets, which could affect the VCP's grip on power. One example, arising from a seemingly trivial incident, occurred during the

¹³ TING-FANG, Cheng and LI, Lauly. "Vietnam to make Apple Watch and MacBook for first time ever", *Nikkei Asia*. 17 August 2022. Available at: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Technology/Vietnam-to-make-Apple-Watch-and-MacBook-for-first-time-ever> [accessed: 09/03/2023].

¹⁴ CIAO. "Vietnam Briefing Sheet". February 2023. Available at: https://ciaonet.org/catalog?f%5Blocation%5D%5B%5D=Viet+Nam&f%5Btopic%5D%5B%5D=Summary&q=&search_field=all_fields&searched=yes&sort=pub_date+desc [accessed: 08/03/2023].

visit to the UK in October 2021 of Vietnamese leaders, part of the Vietnamese delegation attending the Climate Change Conference in Glasgow. Some of these leaders were filmed laying flowers at Karl Marx's tomb and then eating at a fancy restaurant, which was enough to spark some protests in Vietnam.¹⁵

Environmental and energy issues

As a result of the pursuit for economic growth and to become a leading country in Southeast Asia – in the style of China or the so-called "Asian tigers", such as South Korea or Singapore – Vietnam has other issues to resolve, such as the state of its environment or its dependence on foreign energy, especially when the need for energy is increasing at the same rate as the consumption of companies established in the country.

Vietnam is one of the most polluted countries in the world, with serious environmental problems, including river and coastal water pollution from transport and industry, increasing forest degradation, poor soil conditions (the country is the world's second largest rice producer), the gradual loss of unique biodiversity and poor waste management.¹⁶

On 14 December 2022, Vietnam and the G7 signed a historic Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) to help the country invest in renewable energy, thereby reducing its dependence on coal and other fossil fuels, through targeted funding. In addition, Vietnam made a commitment to net zero emissions by 2050, an even more ambitious target than other Southeast Asian countries. However, with the current global energy crisis resulting from the war in Ukraine, Vietnam is even more dependent on coal, which is estimated to produce 52 percent of the country's electricity needs.¹⁷

Thus, Vietnam hopes to complement its emission reduction plan by importing liquefied natural gas and, above all, crude oil. The oil flowing into Vietnam comes mainly from

¹⁵ SEN, Joydeep. "Key security agency will grow stronger in Vietnam". Oxford Analytica, 24 January 2023. Available at: <https://dailybrief.oxan.com/Analysis/DB275503/Key-security-agency-will-grow-stronger-in-Vietnam> [accessed: 10/03/2023].

¹⁶ RANE. "The West Gives Vietnam's Climate Goals a Shot in the Arm - And a Shot at Success". Stratfor, 1 December 2022. Available at: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/west-gives-vietnams-climate-goals-shot-arm-and-shot-success> [accessed: 05/03/2023].

¹⁷ NGUYEN, Trang. "Vietnam's challenge to wean off coal", *The Interpreter*. Lowy Institute, 28 February 2023. Available at: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/vietnam-s-challenge-wean-coal> [accessed: 09/03/2023].

Russia and it is Russian companies that have been operating in the Vietnamese energy sector; it is estimated that up to 30% of the crude oil and around 25% of the gas in Vietnam is operated by such companies.¹⁸ It should be recalled that Vietnam adopted a neutral stance on the war in Ukraine in the UN resolution condemning Russia in March 2022, a stance it continues to maintain and which enables smooth and continuous diplomatic relations between the two countries.¹⁹

Another major problem for Vietnam is the waters of the Mekong River. With a length of 4,880 kilometres and a catchment area of more than 800,000 square kilometres, it is a source of life for the countries in the region through which it meanders, and therefore a source of dispute. The Mekong rises in the Tibet region of China and flows through Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia before emptying into the great delta in southern Vietnam, one of the largest in the world. There is growing concern among affected countries about China's behaviour as it embarks on the construction of huge dams at the beginning of the river. Vietnam is the country most concerned about being the last to receive these waters and fears "stopcock diplomacy", which would be devastating for agriculture and power supply in the country's main producing region, which includes Vietnam's economic capital Ho Chi Minh City, formerly known as Saigon.²⁰

¹⁸ NGUYEN, Thu. "Russia's Renewable Energy Investment in Vietnam: New Projects Underway", *Vietnam Briefing*. 29 June 2022. Available at: <https://www.vietnam-briefing.com/news/russias-investment-in-renewable-energy-in-vietnam-new-projects-underway.html/> [accessed: 08/03/2023].

¹⁹ EL ORDEN MUNDIAL. "The international political chessboard around the war in Ukraine". 07 April 2022. Available at: <https://elordenmundial.com/mapas-y-graficos/mapa-apoyos-rusia/> [accessed: 09/03/2023].

²⁰ AMBRÓS, Isidre. "The Mekong, the river of all conflicts" (Opinion Paper, No. 44). IEEE, 2021. Available at: http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2021/DIEEEO44_2021_ISIAMB_Mekong.pdf [accessed: 09/03/2023].



Figure 5. Vietnam's 3,500 kilometres of coastline are among the most polluted globally and are a problem that requires urgent resolution by the government.
Source: Vietnam News.

Vietnam's coastline deserves special mention, as it is one of the most polluted in the world even though the government has introduced some measures to reduce waste. A devastating environmental catastrophe occurred in 2016, due to the illegal dumping of toxic industrial waste by a subsidiary of the Taiwanese corporation Formosa. The waste affected the health of thousands of people, marine biodiversity and damaged the economy of the affected area, calling into question state regulation and control of the activity of foreign companies in the country.²¹

Between China and the United States

With a historical relationship that has not always been neighbourly, Vietnam tries to avoid being hostile towards China, primarily because its defence budget and capabilities are much smaller. Since the end of the Cold War, Vietnam's foreign policy has sought a certain degree of protection from its large neighbour to the north. Its friendliness or aloofness to third countries depends to a large extent on the state of its relationship with

²¹ EUROPA PRESS. "More than 7,000 Vietnamese victims sue Taiwanese company Formosa over toxic spill". 11 June 2019. Available at: <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-mas-7000-damnificados-vietnamitas-demandan-empresa-taiwanesa-formosa-vertido-toxico-20190611113357.html> [accessed: 05/03/2023].

China. When the two countries are on good terms, Vietnam has no need to seek counterweight from other powers. This was the case in the decade following the normalisation of relations in 1991, when China and Vietnam resolved to fix their land borders and put an end to disputes over the Gulf of Tonkin, formally adopting the so-called "Three Nos" policy: no military alliances, no foreign bases and no external alignments. This is stated in Vietnam's 1998 Defence White Paper.²²

With regard to China, Vietnam has an ambivalent policy of opposition and cooperation that has never been free of tensions. Vietnam is fully involved in the dispute with China on the limits and sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea. However, unlike other Southeast Asian countries – for example, the defiant Philippines in the face of China's claims– it is committed to diplomatic agreements on the matter, mainly within the framework of the agreements initiated between China itself and ASEAN, while respecting international law and the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).²³

Vietnam claims sovereignty over the islands of Hoang Sa and Truong Sa, known in the West as the Paracel and Spratly islands. These were lost in a brief war with China in 1974. The dispute becomes more heated at different times. The latest and most serious crisis occurred in 2014, when the Chinese state-owned National Offshore Oil Corporation carried out oil exploration 120 nautical miles off the Vietnamese coast. Both countries deployed warships without major consequences, but serious riots against Chinese interests broke out in Hanoi: two Chinese citizens were killed and thousands more were evacuated by the Chinese authorities.²⁴

²² VU, Khang. "Why Vietnam's Political Shake-Up Will Not Affect Its Foreign Policy", *The Diplomat*. 25 January 2023. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/why-vietnams-political-shake-up-will-not-affect-its-foreign-policy/> [accessed: 08/03/2023].

²³ VNA. "Vietnam stresses importance of complying with international law in maritime cooperation", *Vietnam Plus*. 12 January 2023. Available at: <https://es.vietnamplus.vn/vietnam-enfatiza-importancia-de-cumplir-conderecho-internacional-en-cooperacion-maritima/171967.vnp> [accessed: 09/03/2023].

²⁴ BBC NEWS. "Territorial conflict sparks anti-China anger in Vietnam". 15 May 2023. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2014/05/140514_asia_china_vietnam_ataques_nc [accessed: 09/03/2023].

Competing Maritime Claims in the South China Sea

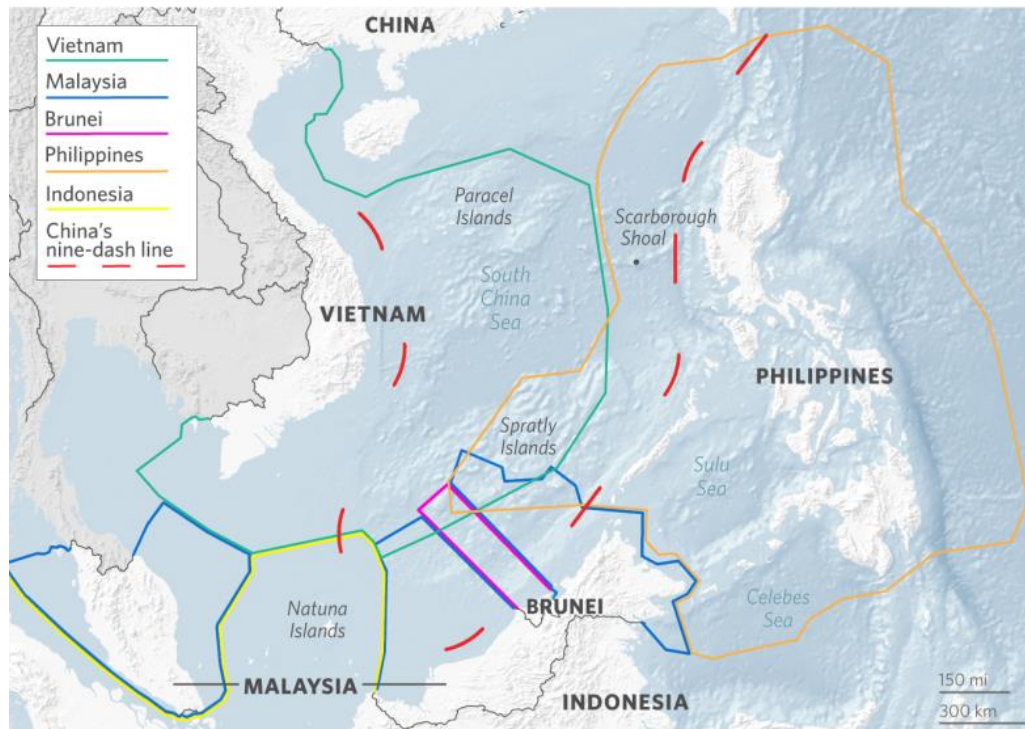


Figure 6. Disputes in the South China Sea, with sovereignty over the Paracel Islands as the main sticking point between Vietnam and China.
Source: Stratfor Worldview.

This would not be the last incident. Although not of such gravity, a high-level meeting between Chinese and Vietnamese leaders on jurisdiction over South China Sea waters was cancelled in 2017 because Hanoi was forced to withdraw from a major multinational oil exploration company active in its waters, under pressure from its powerful neighbour. The vice-chairman of China's Central Military Commission, Fan Changlong, visited Spain to raise Beijing's rejection of Repsol's participation in the project and then travelled to Vietnam to directly request that the country cease oil exploration in the disputed area, threatening the use of force if the Vietnamese government went ahead.²⁵

In addition to the maritime conflict, China is wary of a Vietnam that is a centre of attraction for multinational corporations – as we have seen, especially in the field of technology – to the detriment of its interests. However, China's withdrawal of investment from Vietnam

²⁵ MARSTON, Hunter. "Why tensions are rising between Vietnam and China?", *Foreign Affairs*. 15 August 2017. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2017-08-15/why-tensions-are-rising-between-vietnam-and-china> [accessed: 09/03/2023].

further strains relations between the two nations, as the supply chains for the assembly of Vietnamese-made devices continue to depend on Chinese cross-border transit, as is the case in the technology sector, textiles and rubber. It is estimated that the Chinese market provides 34 percent of the material needs for production in Vietnam.²⁶

In early November 2022, Trong, on his first trip abroad since the start of his third term at the head of the VCP, met with President Xi Jinping, who awarded him the Friendship Medal—the highest honour China reserves for foreign leaders. In addition, an improvement in the aforementioned supply chains was underpinned, barriers to the import of essential products were lifted and, in short, a greater willingness to collaborate in the areas of logistics and trade between the two neighbours was publicised, always within a “socialist path appropriate to the characteristics of each country”. Xi warned that Vietnam should “never let anyone interfere” in the relationship between the two states, a clear reference to US policy in the region.²⁷

On this complicated Southeast Asian chessboard, with the United States’ policy of regional containment of the Chinese giant, Vietnam defends a position of strict neutrality, while still using the American trump card as a guarantor vis-à-vis China. The trade and security partnership between Vietnam and the United States has been very strong since the normalisation of relations in 1995, to the extent that the United States is now Vietnam’s second largest trading partner after China.²⁸

US-Vietnam relations have grown closer in recent decades, as exemplified by the lifting of the 2016 embargo on arms sales to Vietnam, the arrival of the USS Carl Vinson in Vietnam in 2018 – the first aircraft carrier visit to Vietnam since the end of the war – and its participation for the first time in the US-led Rim of the Pacific military exercise (RIMPAC) that same year.

The last few years, however, have not been fruitful for the relationship. In the context of the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP), President

²⁶ CIAO. "Vietnam: Economic structure". February 2023. Available at:

<https://connect.liblynx.com/wayf/1e4f4109d4c8a4471a8c4210d03cc73d> [accessed: 09/03/2023].

²⁷ RANE. "A High-Level Visit Showcases China and Vietnam’s Complicated Relationship". Stratfor, 4 November 2022. Available at: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/high-level-visit-showcases-china-and-vietnams-complicated-relationship> [accessed: 10/03/2023].

²⁸ ORDANIEL, Jeffrey and STENEK, Ariel. "Rethinking 25 Years of U.S.-Vietnam", *Pacific Forum*, vol. 21. October 2021. Available at: [Foes to Partners: 25 Years of U.S.-Vietnam Relations - CIAO \(ciaonet.org\)](https://www.ciaonet.org/foes-to-partners-25-years-of-u.s.-vietnam-relations) [enquiries: 10/03/2023].

Trump, during a 2019 official visit to Hanoi, pointed to the trade surplus in favour of Vietnam, urging the closure of this gap for the benefit of US industry.²⁹ During the Trump Administration, the US approach to Vietnam swung towards hostility: tariffs were implemented in an attempt to change the trade balance between the two countries, Vietnam was accused of artificially devaluing its currency to boost its exports relative to those of the US, and Vietnam was branded an unreliable state and a currency manipulator.³⁰



Figure 7. VCP General Secretary Phu Trong shakes hands with Joe Biden during a 2015 visit to Washington, when Biden was vice-president of the United States
 Source: Taiwan Center for Security Studies.

Today, as part of its new vision for the Indo-Pacific to contain China's rise, the Biden Administration has found a regional partner in Vietnam. The US Indo-Pacific Strategy, published in February 2022, cites Vietnam among a group of countries in the area that could be considered for regional partnerships.³¹ However, the US has not given up on reducing the trade deficit between the two countries and has urged the Vietnamese

²⁹ TRUMP, D. J. "Remarks prior to a meeting with president Nguyen Phu Trong of Vietnam in Hanoi, Vietnam", *Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents*, no. 1-2. 27 February 2023. Available at: <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/remarks-prior-meeting-with-president-nguyen-phu/docview/2198413044/se-2> [accessed: 09/03/2023].

³⁰ RANE. "With Biden in Power, Vietnam Is Set for Success". Stratfor, 28 January 2021. Available at: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/biden-power-vietnam-set-success> [accessed: 07/03/2023].

³¹ THE WHITE HOUSE. *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*. February 2022, p. 9. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf> [accessed: 09/03/2023].

government to purchase aircraft, weapons, liquefied natural gas and certain agricultural products. In any case, there has been a return of an evident rapprochement between Vietnam and the United States, sealed by Kamala Harris's visit to Hanoi in the summer of 2021, the first ever by a US vice-president.³²

Conclusions

Vietnam, in line with its policy of non-alignment, will try to mitigate China's influence, especially since the dispute in the South China Sea remains open and with it the consequent risk of clashes or skirmishes between vessels of both nations. However, Vietnam cannot afford to be on the bad side of its powerful Asian neighbour, given the extensive ties between the two countries, in particular, the economic ones: Vietnam's debt to China stood at \$54 billion at the end of 2022.³³ To counter the risk of excessive influence or dependence, Vietnam is establishing economic and security ties with the United States and other regional powers, with their own territorial disputes with China, such as India.³⁴

Within ASEAN, Vietnam shows a clear vocation for leadership and is a very active member in several key matters for the organisation: advances in food and energy security, cybersecurity, the prosecution of transnational crimes, health and economic stability in Southeast Asia, without excluding, of course, the neighbourhood relationship and the maritime disputes between the countries of the region and China.³⁵ ASEAN is a preferable framework for Vietnam, as the country lacks the necessary clout in the international arena on its own. This shortcoming is made up for through the regional organisation, where it can set objectives and preserve its autonomy of action in the international arena.

³² SEN, Joydeep. "Momentum will build in Vietnamese-US relations". Oxford Analytica, 12 August 2021. Available at: <https://dailybrief.oxan.com/Analysis/DB263425> [accessed: 04/03/2023].

³³ SEN, Joydeep. "Vietnam will be wary of getting too close to China". Oxford Analytica, 24 January 2023. Available at: <https://dailybrief.oxan.com/Analysis/DB274172> [accessed: 09/03/2023].

³⁴ For an overview of the historical relations between Vietnam and India, with a rich exchange in trade, military and lately the cyber field, see the following explanatory report hosted on the Indian Ministry of External Affairs website: *India-Vietnam Relations*. Available at: https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Vietnam_new2021.pdf [accessed: 10/03/2023].

³⁵ VNA. "Vietnam supports ASEAN's cooperation priorities for 2023: ambassador", *Vietnam Plus*. 7 March 2023. Available at: <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/vietnam-supports-aseans-cooperation-priorities-for-2023-ambassador/249427.vnp> [accessed: 10/03/2023].



Figure 8. Representatives of the ASEAN countries pose at the meeting in Indonesia on 6 March.
Source: Vietnam Plus.

Internally, Vietnam's priority seems to be the repression of corruption in the administration, which could be a source of social protest against the regime; this struggle is also interpreted as a disguised way of purging differences within the VCP. Corruption will be a priority issue for President Thuong's new government, under the supervision of the all-powerful General Secretary Trong. The question remains as to whether the latter will seek a fourth term in 2026. Foreign investors now settling in Vietnam may also perceive the country as an unreliable partner if corruption scandals continue to erupt. For these companies, there is a wide choice of countries in which to establish themselves in the region, starting with China.

In ideological terms, according to his inauguration speech, Thuong seems to embrace a return to the theoretically purer approaches of the VCP, advocating the firm application of the "creative development of Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh thought",³⁶ in contrast to his ousted predecessor, Phuc, known for his commitment to economic liberalisation and for maintaining excellent relations with Western countries, starting with the United States. By referring to the Party's traditional foundations, Thuong can underpin the legitimacy of future policies and their acceptance by Vietnamese society, while continuing

³⁶ RANE. "What to Make of Vietnam's New President". Stratfor, 6 March 2023. Available at: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/what-make-vietnams-new-president> [accessed: 09/03/2023].

to deepen, albeit at a more leisurely pace, the country's liberalisation and integration into the global economy.

All in all, fifty years after the Paris Peace Accords, the Vietnam of today seems far removed from the Vietnam of that time, a Vietnam in the midst of a political struggle and fight for independence based on the thought and charisma of Ho Chi Minh.

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