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## **U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership: Present and Possible**

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### **Abstract**

Relations between the United States and Vietnam entered a new era in July 2013 with the conclusion of the U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership agreement announced by President Barack Obama and President Truong Tan Sang. The U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership is an overarching framework for strengthening and deepening cooperation across nine sectors: political and diplomatic relations, trade and economic ties, science and technology, education and training, environment and health, war legacy issues, defence and security, protection and promotion of human rights, and culture, sports and tourism. It has been four years since the U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership was officially launched. It is, therefore, time to assess this comprehensive partnership.

The article will begin with a brief literature review which demonstrates the needs to produce a dedicated analysis of U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership before examining the U.S. and Vietnamese concepts of a comprehensive partnership. It also seeks to explore what have motivated Hanoi and Washington to elevate their bilateral relations to a new height. The article goes on to evaluate developments in the U.S.-Vietnam relations from July 2013 up to July 2017 on five main sectors: *economic ties, security cooperation, people-to-people ties, cooperation on humanitarian and war legacy issues, cooperation on regional and global challenges*. It will demonstrate that the U.S.-Vietnam relationship has achieved important progresses since the announcement of the U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership. Last but not least, the article will look at the possible shapes of the United States and Vietnam in the future.

*Keywords: Vietnam, the United States, comprehensive partnership, cooperation, security.*

### **Introduction**

The United States and Vietnam, wartime rivals more than four decades ago, signed the Comprehensive Partnership in July 2013, which covers not only trade, development but also security cooperation. There have been some discussions and debates about the value of the U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership; however, the existing literature does not include a dedicated analysis of (i) why the U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership has arisen, (ii) how the U.S.-Vietnam

relations have progressed since the inking of the comprehensive partnership in 2013, and (iii) what the United States and Vietnam should do to foster their partnership in the future. This article seeks to fill this gap by exploring the emergence of the U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership under the Barack Obama administration. Drawing on the existing literature on U.S.-Vietnam relations, U.S. and Vietnamese government documents as well as scholarly writings, this article argues that the United States and Vietnam have formed the comprehensive partnership as part of their deliberate effort both to institutionalize and structure their bilateral relations.

Towards that end, the article is divided into four main parts. It will first review the literature of U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership to show the gap that needs to fill in. Then, it will discuss how the United States and Vietnam conceptualize a comprehensive partnership and explore the motivations for Washington and Hanoi to upgrade their bilateral relationship in July 2013. Next, it seeks to evaluate developments in the U.S.-Vietnam relations from July 2013 up to July 2017 on five main sectors: economic ties, security cooperation, people-to-people ties, cooperation on humanitarian and war legacy issues, cooperation on regional and global challenges. This evaluation will show how the U.S.-Vietnam relationship has progressed since the announcement of the U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership. Finally, the article will look at the possible shapes of the United States and Vietnam in the future.

### **Literature Review**

Literature that relates specifically to U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership tends to be briefly mentioned in a wider discussion of the bilateral relations between the two nations. The two Congressional Research Service Reports in 2014 and 2016 make a fleeting mention of the U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership under the Obama administration (Manyin, 2014 & Martin, 2016). These reports are mere reflections from U.S. views because they were prepared for the U.S. Congress. Besides, each report covers only one single year of the four years of U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive

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partnership and exclusively focuses on economic relations while Vietnam-US relations have witnessed significant developments between 2013 and 2017. The closest example is Carlyle A. Thayer's *The U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership: What's in a Name?* (2013) that shortly explains the nature of the U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership (Thayer, 2013). Though it is an excellent account of why Hanoi and Washington decided to upgrade their relationship to comprehensive partnership, it does not offer a detailed analysis of how both sides would implement the comprehensive partnership. Thus far, there has been no critical review of how U.S.-Vietnam relations have progressed since the announcement of the U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership in July 2013. This is the gap this article has attempted to fill in.

### **Defining Comprehensive Partnership: Vietnamese and U.S. Perspectives**

Before analyzing and assessing new developments in U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership since July 2013 up to July 2017, it is necessary to examine Hanoi and Washington's viewpoints of a comprehensive partnership.

As for Vietnam, since the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945, its leadership has realized the needs to cooperate with various countries in the world and formed a clear diplomatic approach (Hoàng Chí, 1987; Nguyễn Văn Linh, 1987; Phan Doãn Nam, 1988; Nguyễn Cơ Thạch, 1989; Gareth Porter, 1990; Nguyễn Hữu Cát, 1996; and Chu Văn Chúc, 2004). The first President of Vietnam, Hồ Chí Minh, said in 1946: "With democratic countries, Viet Nam is ready to implement the policy of openness and cooperation in all areas" (Hồ Chí Minh, 2002), stressing that "Viet Nam will cooperate with countries that are willing to cooperate with Viet Nam in an honest and equal manner. [...] *Viet Nam... is a friend to all democratic countries and does not create hatred or hostility against anyone*" (Hồ Chí Minh, 2002). Hồ Chí Minh's principle of cooperation and openness to maintain a peaceful environment has been the touchstone of Vietnam's foreign policy. As Vietnam

embarked on its renewal process in 1986, Hanoi, based on Hồ Chí Minh's diplomatic thinking, reconfirmed its foreign policy approach: more friends, fewer enemies in order to broaden its foreign relations. This view has been clearly stated in the 7<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of Viet Nam: "Viet Nam wants to be a friend to all countries in the international community striving for peace, independence, and development" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam, 2006). This was reasserted and developed through the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> National Party Congresses.

Vietnam seeks to pursue and implement "a consistent foreign policy of independence, self-reliance, peace, cooperation, and development; multilateralization and diversification of foreign relations; proactive international integration; being a friend, a reliable partner and a responsible member of the international community for the sake of national interests and for a strong and prosperous Socialist Viet Nam" (Phạm Bình Minh, 2014). In other words, there are four main themes in Vietnam's contemporary foreign policy: "independence and self-reliance, multilateralization and diversification of external relations, struggle and cooperation, and proactive international integration" as summarized by Carlyle A. Thayer in his analysis of Vietnam's foreign policy in the context of rising Sino-U.S. competition (Thayer, 2016). From Vietnam policy perspective, a comprehensive partnership should concentrate "on building close cooperative ties in all areas, including politics, economics, culture, national defence, and security" (Phạm Bình Minh, 2014). It is noted that forming a comprehensive partnership "often adhere to a principle of not against a third country" (Phạm Bình Minh, 2014). In Vietnam's view, "*Comprehensive partnerships* are at a level lower than strategic partnerships and higher than conventional friendly cooperation. Some areas of cooperation in comprehensive partnerships reach the strategic level but the connectivity and attention to each other's strategic interests in other areas are not high. This framework stresses broad cooperation to consolidate trust toward the future" (Phạm Bình Minh, 2014) Entering a comprehensive partnership allows countries to

work closely and effectively on a wide range of areas without establishing a Cold War-like military alliance. Vietnam sees comprehensive partnerships as a firm foundation for the establishment of various close bilateral mechanisms, namely, strategic dialogue on politics, economics and security. These mechanisms are necessary for sharing viewpoints, experience and measures to enhance political trust while minimizing disagreements and differences.

As for the United States, while Washington has numerous comprehensive partnerships, there have only been few attempts to define them. A close reading of the joint statements between the U.S. presidents and his counterparts announcing their comprehensive partnership reveals that the United States usually views a comprehensive partnership as a loose but structured framework of cooperation between the United States and other countries to tackle common challenges and seize chances in various areas. From Washington's perspective, a comprehensive partnership is not a tight form of alignment, entailing a much lower level of commitment than a strategic partnership or an alliance. For instance, as the United States and Mongolia announced their comprehensive partnership in 2009, President George W. Bush and President Bagabandi affirmed that the comprehensive partnership, built on shared values and common strategic interests, will open a new era of cooperation between the two countries. President Bush made it clear that the United States strongly supports "Mongolia's democratic and economic transition and reforms and welcomed Mongolia's progress toward becoming a mature and stable democracy and a private sector-led free market economy" (The White House, 2009).

In the same vein, in the 2014 joint statement by President Obama and Malaysian Prime Minister Najib, it is stated that the comprehensive partnership aims to advance "the two countries' common interests and the shared values of the people of the United States and Malaysia. Under the Comprehensive Partnership, both countries commit to further strengthening dialogue mechanisms in key areas including political and diplomatic cooperation, trade and investment, education and

people-to-people ties, security and defense cooperation, as well as collaboration on the environment, science and technology, and energy” (The White House, 2014). Similarly, in their joint statement on the Indonesia-U.S. Comprehensive Partnership in 2010, it underscores that this comprehensive partnership is long-term commitment to “broaden, deepen and elevate bilateral relations between the United States and Indonesia. It recognizes the global significance of enhanced cooperation between the world’s second and third largest democracies, the tremendous possibilities for economic and development cooperation, and the importance of fostering exchanges and mutual understanding between two of the world’s most diverse nations” (The White House, 2010).

Obviously, the United States conceptualises comprehensive partnerships as a long-term commitment between the United States and another country to enhance cooperation in several areas. The implementation of the comprehensive partnership should be fair and transparent consistent with the two partners' constitutions. This kind of limited alignment allows the United States and other countries to develop a closer bilateral economic and trade relationship without binding commitment relative to alliances. This flexible and non-binding nature of comprehensive partnership helps Washington to reap economic and diplomatic rewards while it does not have to provide security assistance like its alliances with Japan or South Korea.

Indeed, both Vietnam and the United States see comprehensive partnerships as an approach to deepen and strengthen relationship with other countries and work together to first advance the national interest of both countries, and then to promote global peace and prosperity. The term “partnership” implies a convergence of interests in various areas from economics, trade, investment, education, culture to diplomacy and security. It is fairly clear that Hanoi and Washington interpret the term "comprehensive partnership" in international diplomacy as a new era of cooperation and collaboration between the two nations to support each other and gain benefits together. While enhancing and expanding the cooperative relationships, two countries in a comprehensive partnership are expected to address

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common challenges facing them. From U.S. and Vietnam policy perspectives, then, comprehensive partnerships are more important than normal bilateral relationships, but certainly not an actual alliance. Countries signing a comprehensive partnership make a long-term commitment with each other, but this commitment will not lead to the loss of autonomy.

### **Driving Forces for U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership**

Since 1995, the United States and Vietnam have worked together to improve their relations due to overlapping strategic and economic interests (Manyin, 2004). While U.S.-Vietnam relationship over the last 22 years have been predicated mostly on economic and commercial ties, there have been greater efforts to increase cooperation in mutual ways in order to improve bilateral relations (Siracusa and Hang Nguyen, 2017). High-level visits between Vietnamese and the U.S. governments have taken place to discuss how to move the U.S.-Vietnam relations forward. Especially, in November 2003 important progress toward normalization of military relations was made. Vietnamese Defense Minister Pham Van Tra visited Washington, DC, and met senior officials, including U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Richard Meyer. In 2005, the United States and Vietnam signed an agreement on intelligence that allowed the two countries to cooperate on intelligence sharing. Security cooperation between Vietnam and the United States reached its momentum in 2011 when they inked the Memorandum of Understanding for enhancing bilateral defence cooperation (Stern, 2012).

From 2010, the United States and Vietnam expressed their will to bring the bilateral relations to a greater height level. For instance, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton stated in Hanoi in July 2010 that the Obama administration was prepared to take this U.S.-Vietnam relationship "to the next level" (Clinton, 2010). She explained that the United States views this relationship not only as significant on its own nature, but as part of a strategy to increase U.S. engagement in the Asia-Pacific region and especially Southeast Asia (Clinton, 2010). Also, since 2010 as China sought to consolidate

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its own claims in the disputed waters and islands in the South China Sea (Fravel, 2011; and Swaine & Fravel, 2011), the United States and Vietnam have increased cooperation on issues of maritime freedom and security. As for Vietnam, its main goals in foreign policy are prosperity and security for Vietnam. The Vietnamese government realises that cultivating a partnership with the United States will help Vietnam to fulfil its goals (Siracusa and Hang Nguyen, 2017).

In 2013, President Obama and Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang met in the White House and announced the forming of the U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership that is to provide an “overarching framework” for the two nations to cooperate more closely on various sectors (Vietnam News, 2013). With the conclusion of the comprehensive partnership in 2013, the U.S. and Vietnamese governments have made a long-term commitment to expand and strengthen their bilateral cooperation across a wide spectrum. This landmark agreement has moved the relationship to a new phase. Indeed, both the United States and Vietnam have their own interests and goals in accelerating their bilateral relations to a comprehensive partnership.

***U.S. Interests and Goals in the Comprehensive Partnership***

Presently, motivations for the United States in the partnership include growing trade and flows of investment, the population of over 1 million Vietnamese-Americans, the legacy of the Vietnam War, the thinking that Vietnam is becoming an important player in Southeast Asia, and shared concern over China's rise (Sharevski, 2014). U.S. goals in comprehensive partnership with Vietnam include opening markets for U.S. businesses, spreading human rights and democracy in Vietnam, countering China's growing influence Southeast Asia, working together to ensure the principles of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, and increase U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia.

***Vietnam’s Interests and Goals in the Comprehensive Partnership***

As for Vietnam, since 1986, the Vietnamese government has sought to pursue a multi-pronged foreign policy. This policy aims to develop the Vietnamese economy through market-oriented reforms,

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maintain good relations with Southeast Asian nations, expand relations with China, and improve relations with the United States as a counterweight to its giant neighbour, China (Marvin Ott, 2003).

As a great power in world politics, the United States has been crucial not only in Hanoi's strategic calculations, but also in its national economic developments. For example, Vietnam sought to sign and ratify the bilateral trade agreement (BTA) with the United States, because Vietnamese leadership understood that this would help to benefit Vietnamese economy. Furthermore, despite suffering serious legacies of the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese people seem to have a good image of the United States (State Department Office of Research, 2008).

Countering Chinese ambitions in Southeast Asia while preserving its territorial and other interests in the South China Sea are vital to Vietnam. Forming a comprehensive partnership with the United States may be a strategy employed by Hanoi in the context of China's growing assertiveness. Apart from that, Vietnam wants to see a sustained U.S. presence in Asia to maintain a favourable international economic environment that Vietnam really needs to achieve its goal of becoming an industrialized nation by 2020.

From the information presented in this section, we can freely conclude that the need to upgrade bilateral relations between the two formal foes, the United States and Vietnam, is real and urgent. This confirms Lord Palmerson's famous remark in 1848 that: "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow" (Palmerston, 1848) Nations have no permanent foes and friends, but permanent interests that draw them to the same side. The main and most obvious reasons for the emergence of the U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership are prosperity and security. They both see that they really need each other for their own economic growth. They also see China's growing assertiveness as a threat to their national interest. Henceforth, they need to institutionalise and structure their relationship to protect and advance their interests (Riegl, Landovský and Valko, 2014).

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## **Progression in the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership**

### *Economic ties*

According to U.S. trade statistics, trade between Vietnam and the United States has doubled in the last 4 years, and topped \$ 52 billion in 2016 (US Census Bureau , 2017) U.S. exports to Vietnam increased from \$ 5,036.8 million in 2013 to \$ 10,100.4 million in 2016. U.S. imports from Vietnam grew from \$ 24,651.0 in 2013 to \$ 42,098.8 in 2016. In only four months of 2017, U.S. exports to Vietnam reached \$ 2,740.4 million and U.S. imports from Vietnam stood at \$ 14,143.1 million. U.S. exports to Vietnam increased by 23 percent in 2015, the largest increase of the United States' top 50 trade partners, and only one of two markets with double-digit growth. At the same time, the United States is still Vietnam's largest export market with an annual growth rate of 24% (The White House, 2016).

Economic relations between the United States and Vietnam have broadened (The White House, 2016). The United States has made the commitment to supporting Vietnam's economic reforms. U.S. investment in Vietnam has increased considerably since 2013 and reached \$11.7 billion in 2016 (Vietnam Investment Review, 2016). The United States became one of Vietnam's largest foreign investors. Many giant U.S. groups, namely, Intel, General Electric, Microsoft, AIG, Coca-Cola have been operating effectively in Vietnam. Much of this rapid growth in economic ties between the United States and Vietnam can be attributed to U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership. The other contributing factor is Vietnam's conclusion of free trade agreements (FTAs) with the European Union, South Korea, and the Eurasian Economic Union, as well as the official establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015. This has propelled U. S. businesses to expand their investment in Vietnam.

### *Security cooperation*

Security cooperation has been one of the important cooperation sectors in the U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership. There have been some advances in U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation since 2013 until now, including increased collaboration between the U.S. and Vietnamese coast guards, joint exercises, maritime security assistance to Vietnam and even the lifting of the embargo on lethal arms sales to Vietnam. In 2015 the United States and Vietnam signed a Joint Vision Statement on Defence Relations, confirming Washington and Hanoi's willingness to work more closely on five areas of defence cooperation: high-level dialogues; maritime security; search and rescue; humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and peacekeeping (The White House, 2015). Furthermore, the United States pledged to help Vietnam foster its maritime security by transferring a decommissioned American cutter and six 45-foot patrol boats, known as Metal Sharks, to the Vietnamese Coast Guard (Landler, 2017). The United States also provided Vietnam with training and curriculum development. In his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore on June 5, 2016, U.S. Defence Secretary Ashton Carter made it clear that with the lifting of the ban on lethal weapons sales to Vietnam, "Vietnam will have greater access to the military equipment it needs" (Carter, 2016). This is a strong restatement of what has been underlined in the Joint Vision Statement on Defence Relations between the two countries: "expand defence trade between our two countries, potentially including cooperation in the production of new technologies and equipment, where possible under current law and policy restrictions" (The American Interest, 2015). Carter also announced that the Pentagon would send a peacekeeping expert to the U.S. embassy in Vietnam to help educate and guide Vietnam's entry into global peacekeeping operations. In his official visit to the United States in May 2017, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc said he hoped to see more U.S. assistance to Vietnam in the area of United Nations peacekeeping operations (Kiet, 2017). This is in line with what stated in the comprehensive partnership that Vietnam and the United States should advance

cooperation not only bilaterally, but regionally and globally as well. Indeed, the strengthening of defence relations since 2013 would open the door for closer security cooperation in between Vietnam and the United States in the future.

***U.S. Vietnam people-to-people ties***

The United States and Vietnam now enjoy a strong friendship based on mutual interests. People-to-people exchanges offer the most immediate and impactful way for ordinary Vietnamese and U.S. people to learn about and from each other. Language exchange programs, academic and professional exchange programs, and cultural activities and tourism all serve as crucial avenues for broadening and deepening the kind of closed ties that enrich the U.S.-Vietnam partnership.

Education has been a natural area for strengthening people-to-people ties between the United States and Viet Nam. The number of Vietnamese students has increased significantly since 2013 with double-digit growth in many of these years. For example, in 2015, the number of Vietnamese students in the United States rose by 12.9% compared to 2014 (Vietnamnet, 2015). Along with the Vietnam Education Foundation, the Fulbright Program has contributed considerably to the exchange of professors, scholars, students and specialists between Vietnam and the United States. In addition, more than 13,000 Vietnamese have taken part in the Young Southeast Asia Leaders Initiative (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2016). Academic ties between the United States and Vietnam will be expanded with the establishment of the Fulbright University in Ho Chi Minh City in 2016. The university will bring world-class education to the Vietnamese people as underscored by Secretary of State John Kerry in 2015 on his trip to Vietnam, “Fulbright University will be an incredible asset to Vietnam, because with academic freedom and with the energy and association with Harvard and all of the things that will come from it, they’ll...take its education levels to an even higher level” (Center, 2015). It also should be noted that the United States and Vietnam have concluded an agreement that

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will allow the Peace Corps to establish English-language training programs in Vietnam’s two largest cities, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (CBS News, 2016).

In addition, tourism has an important part to play in developing a strong and enduring relationship between the Vietnamese and U.S. peoples. According to Vietnamese statistics, “the United States has become the largest foreign investor in Vietnam’s tourism sector” (Thanh Nien News, 2015). In 2014, Vietnam attracted 443,776 U.S. tourists, increased about 3% compared with 2013 (Thanh Nien News, 2015). In 2015, more than 80,000 Vietnamese visited the United States <sup>1</sup> (The White House, 2016). Noticeably, Vietnam has extended the visa duration for U.S. tourists from three months to twelve months and expected to attract one million U.S. visitors by 2017 (Vietnam Net, 2015). Indeed, education and tourism have been the focuses of cooperation between Vietnam and the United States to promote their mutual understanding.

***Cooperation on humanitarian and war legacy issues***

U.S.-Vietnam strengthened cooperation can also be seen in humanitarian and war legacy issues. As many parts of Vietnam are still heavily contaminated by unexploded ordnance (UXO) and Agent Orange dating from the Vietnam War, the United States and Vietnam have worked closely to address UXO/demining, and Agent Orange. For instance, the United States has invested about \$90 million in Agent dioxin remediation at Da Nang airport, a dioxin "hotspot" (U.S. AID, 2017). The Da Nang Airport Remediation Project will help to clean up the dioxin contamination and reduce the risk of exposure to dioxin and to build up Vietnamese capacity for conducting the same remediation activities at other areas in Vietnam (U.S. AID, 2017). The United States has also funded an environmental assessment at Bien Hoa airbase (The White House, 2016). Furthermore, in 2016, the United States and Vietnam inked a letter of intent to form a working group for the Cooperative Humanitarian and Medical Storage Initiative, which will enhance cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2016).

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As for Vietnam, Hanoi has made great efforts to help Washington to account for U.S. personnel missing in action from the war (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2016). In September 2013, the two nations celebrated the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their cooperation in searching for remains of U.S. servicemen killed during the Vietnam War. Major General Kelly McKeague from the U.S. Department of Defence and the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, highly appreciated supports from Vietnamese government, provincial authorities and ordinary Vietnamese people in searching for missing service personnel from the Vietnam War. He said, “Without extending your hand in friendship and overcoming the legacy of war, our successes of the past 25 years would not have been possible” (Vietnam Embassy in the United States, 2013).

### ***Cooperation on regional and global challenges***

Cooperation on regional and global challenges is also another component folded into the U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership. This has allowed Vietnam and the United States to increase cooperation on regional and global challenges, namely, climate change, sustainable development, nuclear and radioactive source security, global health security and wildlife trafficking. For example, the United States and Vietnam commonly view climate change as one of the greatest challenges facing global community. Thus, the two governments had announced the U.S.-Vietnam joint partnership on climate change in May 2016. Accordingly, Vietnam and the United States will work together to (i) enhance public and private businesses to use clean, renewable and low greenhouse gas emissions energy sources, (ii) increase resilience and reduce vulnerability to climate change in both the Mekong and Red River Delta and (iii) contribute to the Low Emission Development Strategies (LEDS) Global Partnership and Asia LEDS Platform U.S. (Department of State, 2016). In the framework of the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) launched in 2009, the United States has collaborated with Vietnam to develop a regional approach to sustainable environmental management and build up capacity to manage shared water resources. None of this is expected to change with the

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election of President Donald Trump. In addition, the United States and Vietnam have collaborated to fight against transnational crime, including through the UN Office on Drugs and Crime to enhance effective border management in Vietnam by setting up border liaison offices (The White House, 2016).

### **Prospect for the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership**

Washington and Hanoi have worked hard to build up their relationship. The optimistic prospect for the future - not the burden of the past – continues to guide the U.S.-Vietnam partnership. The immediate future will see much continuity in U.S. policy towards Vietnam under the Trump administration. Though it was speculated that under U.S.-Vietnam relations would be precarious under the Trump administration, (Roncevert Ganan Almond, 2016). the reality shows that the United States continues to cultivate a partnership with Vietnam.

Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc visited the United States in May 2017. Before his meeting with Phuc at the Oval Room, President Trump said “We’re going to be discussing trade. We’re going to be discussing North Korea. We have many things to talk about and we look forward to being together, very much so” (The New York Times, 2017). The two leaders' meeting is an indication that the Trump administration has sought to build on the progress made by the Obama administration. In addition, President Trump will visit Vietnam and attend the APEC Leaders' summit in November 2017. Obviously, President Trump will be likely to continue President Obama's approach to Vietnam in the years to come and may even enhance U.S. engagement with Vietnam. It is a natural trend for the United States and Vietnam to shelve their bitter past and move to common ground. Their leaders will seek to foster the partnership by increasingly broadening and deepening political, diplomatic, economic, and trade relations. The United States and Vietnam will further their cooperation on *science and technology, national defence and security, education, people-to-people exchange, humanitarian*

*and war legacy issues, as well as regional and global challenges as these are important factors to strengthen their comprehensive partnership.*

*Doubtless, China will remain an important factor in the U.S.-Vietnam partnership. China's growing influence in Asia and in the world is perceived by Washington as a challenge for U.S. dominance. That Beijing launched new initiatives, namely, the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank (AIIB), the One Belt – One Road (OBOR) project, and built massive artificial islands in the South China Sea has been a shared concern for both the United States and other regional nations including Vietnam. Facing China's growing assertiveness, Washington and Hanoi tend to be committed to strengthening their comprehensive partnership by continuing high-level contacts and delegation exchanges. For instance, the United States and Vietnam will maintain the regular dialogue between the U.S. Secretary of State and Vietnam's Minister for Foreign Affairs to exchange views, discuss measures and set up mechanisms to advance the comprehensive partnership (Hanoi Times, 2017).*

With the shared strategic and economic interests, it is likely that the United States and Vietnam relations will become warmer and closer in the future with increased cooperation on various areas. The full essence of U.S.-Vietnam relations remains mutual interests, and Hanoi and Washington have been and will be moving closer together for strategic reasons. This is because both nations have been building strategic trust, hence, laying the foundation for an enduring partnership in the future.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of evolution of the relations between the United States and Vietnam from the establishment of the comprehensive partnership in 2013 to present demonstrates that the bilateral relationship has undergone a special development. The building of comprehensive partnership is an indication that Hanoi and Washington have sought to work more closely together to pursue actual benefits. Despite the significance of external factors, namely, China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, the fundamental factors causing this development were Hanoi and Washington's

domestic goals to deepen interdependence in such areas as: economic ties, security cooperation, U.S.-Vietnam people-to-people ties, cooperation on humanitarian and war legacy issues, and cooperation on regional and global challenges. Advancing these cooperation areas has always been the primary goals for both the United States and Vietnam. As for Vietnam, the needs to attain development goals in the transition period and further integration into the world economy brought about a new preference in expanding relations with the United States. As for the United States, increased engagement with Vietnam has provided opportunities for Washington to promote U.S. interests in Asia. Mutual interests define the U.S. and Vietnam's policy adjustments to each other, both as responses to domestic demands and as reactions to China's increased assertiveness in the South China Sea. The establishment of the U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership can ensure political trust and foster collaboration in some significant international issues of shared interests. There is no reason to think otherwise.

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