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## JOURNAL

## Strengthening Ties with Vietnam as a ?South China Sea Ally?

By *[Daniel Ward](#)*

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### Strengthening Ties with Vietnam as a ‘South China Sea Ally’

Daniel Ward

#### Introduction

Current tensions in the South China Sea, and their direct effect on U.S. vital interests, need to be addressed through strong relationships and alliances. The U.S. cannot be content to rely on past goodwill and must actively build and nurture its ties within the region. Current events demonstrate that even once-solid connections, such as those with the Philippines, can be threatened with regime changes. The U.S. can leverage Vietnam’s conflicts with China and our own growing ties with this former enemy to build a mainstay in the bulwark against Chinese expansion, and have another ally to counter any future Chinese aggression. Within the overall construct of such a relationship, the maritime domain is at the forefront of priorities.

This domain is critical as the U.S. may arguably be losing its ‘traditional’ cohort, the Philippines, based on recent developments which indicate their new leadership. While the U.S. could be said to have strong alliances in the Pacific region with Japan and Australia, neither has a direct presence in the South China Sea as compared to the Philippines, and with the potential loss of their support, the U.S. would be wise to invest in another nation with ‘local’ ties to bolster U.S. interests. Even with a volatile history between them, Vietnam makes sense as a partner for the U.S. Historical and current tensions between China and Vietnam are heightened in certain aspects of disagreement, particularly with regards to maritime resources. The U.S. can work to support Vietnamese claims to strengthen relationships and counter Chinese movements. The U.S. can build upon current efforts underway with Vietnam, such as ties between the U.S. Coast Guard and Vietnam Marine Police.

The U.S. needs local support in the South China Sea if we are truly committed to countering extensive development of China’s military footprint, which could effectively make the South China Sea a non-permissive area based on their control of several islands. Diplomacy and negotiation are bolstered by actual ability; and without a strong presence in the region the U.S. does not have a formidable position from which to engage China in diplomacy. Another regional ally would greatly help this cause, and Vietnam is the best candidate.

#### South China Sea ‘Construct’

The South China Sea is a current backdrop for China’s increasing global ambitions and desire to cement itself as the preeminent power in Asia. China is working towards “a grand strategy for itself that is

meant...to pacify its periphery...and replace the United States as the most important power in Asia” [1]. To counter this movement, “forward-stationed U.S. forces...signal U.S. political commitment to the region” [2]. However, the U.S. cannot realistically maintain a solo posture in the region; allies are needed whom also have needs to balance Chinese ambition. In one such example, “Vietnam’s government, pressed by an ever more powerful China, knows it cannot stand up to Beijing alone and is cautiously moving toward increased ties with the United States” [3]. Numerous factors in the China-Vietnam rivalry have increasingly come to the forefront over the last several years to include: disputes over South China Sea territory; conflicting energy related exploration; disagreement on fishing rights and clashes between fishermen and patrol forces; and alliances against one another across the Diplomatic-Information-Military-Economic (DIME) spectrum. Added to this mix, “rising nationalism in both Vietnam and China fuels this race for regional influence and makes it harder for leaders in each country to back down from any confrontation, whatever the initial genesis” [4]. This set of factors allows the U.S. to engender itself towards Vietnam as both nations have common purpose in working to curb the extent of China’s South China Sea control.

The South China Sea is important regionally and globally as a source of energy resources, fisheries, and trade. Control of these sea lanes through various aspects of DIME, particularly military control, give nations leverage upon one another. As Julian Corbett might argue, control of the sea and its lines of communication effectively gives one control of all aspects of that region and its coastal environs. This is the goal of both China and the U.S. However, China enjoys a proximity advantage. China’s “pursuit of power in all its dimensions...is driven by the conviction that China...could never attain its destiny unless it amassed the power necessary to ward off the hostility of those opposed to this quest” [5]. Smaller, regional powers are at odds with this prospect. Both “China and Vietnam claim the entire area of the South China Sea and the islands within it while Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Brunei have laid claims to contiguous areas” [6]. Compared to China, there are two sets of principles which favor Vietnam’s claims, both that of ‘effective occupation’ and the rules of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which sets down internationally accepted norms for claims on exclusive economic zones. Perhaps amassed as one, a group resolve can best be applied to at least balance China’s stance of occupation. But simple diplomacy will not be effective, as “Beijing is rapidly dredging and militarizing disputed maritime areas” [7].

The U.S. cannot assume historical alliances will hold up under such conditions, and the U.S. cannot idly count upon international dynamics to be stable. With the recent election in the Philippines of President Rodrigo Duterte, the U.S. may see a trusted ally move to the sidelines or even towards the other side of the coin. As reported in *The Wall Street Journal*, “a top U.S. diplomat said that Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte was stoking “consternation” among governments and investors by repeatedly raising doubts about the future of the alliance between their two countries” [8]. This rhetoric is enhanced by statements from Duterte that “the Philippines would begin buying weapons from China and Russia (the US is the traditional main supplier), and that it would cease joint patrols of the South China Sea with the US” [9]. China is strategically working to control the lanes of the South China Sea through a “‘strategic triangle’...that would allow it to monitor and police the waterway for decades to come...with bunkers, landing strips, and surveillance equipment” and which includes its current control of the Spratly and Paracel chains and its ambitions on the “Scarborough Shoal in the northeast” [10]. While the Philippines has served as a buttress against Chinese control of this important area, under the new president the Philippines are seemingly “set to essentially reverse course and give China Scarborough Shoal after all” [11].

Where can the U.S. find basing and naval allies in the region to support its cause? The Philippines support may be assessed as diminished, and other traditional support is not logistically robust, noting that

“Australia lacks the maintenance facilities required by a carrier strike group” and “Guam's infrastructure is outdated and would require massive investment to accommodate a carrier” [12]. Hence more closely linked support is required. And China has taken notice. In response to recent ASEAN meetings, in which regional members have tried to organize against Chinese aggression, “Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin warned ASEAN against being influenced by outside powers, a clear rebuke to Washington” [13]. Among nations who may disregard Chinese threats and be willing to bolster an alliance against the regional powerhouse, is a former U.S. enemy, Vietnam. Why? Past tensions are increasing between this coastal nation and China, and the U.S. should be ready to mesh with Vietnam in pursuit of common goals.

### **China and Vietnam**

China's largest regional rival in the maritime realm is Vietnam. As discussed by Leszek Buszynski, “Vietnam is the major oil producer in the area” and as it “attempts to exploit new fields, there is the possibility of renewed clashes with China, which has consistently opposed Vietnam's attempts to conclude exploration agreements with international oil companies in the South China Sea” [14]. In addition to energy, fishing grounds are a point of contention, and “the Vietnamese claim that 63 fishing boats with 725 crew members have been seized by the Chinese since 2005 in the South China Sea” [15]. An overall analysis concludes that “China has interfered massively in Vietnam's economic development — not only against its fishing, but against its offshore oil and gas exploration and extraction” [16]. One wonders, can Vietnam compete? Vietnam has been moved upon aggressively by China in both the energy resource and fisheries arenas. But Vietnam is not poised to stand toe-to-toe with China if or when tensions escalate, and “analysts believe that Vietnam's deterrence strategy is not designed to confront China in a conflict, but rather intended to create some risks for the Chinese navy if it decided to resort to force” [17].

Certain measures on the international stage of diplomacy have proved less than fruitful, such as “when Vietnam threatened to file a U.N. arbitration claim against China in mid-2014 as maritime tensions flared” and “China responded by freezing credit lines for ongoing Vietnamese energy and infrastructure projects, forcing some projects into restructuring and leaving others stranded” [18]. In conjunction, the “two countries have never adopted a memorandum of understanding (MOU) about how to resolve maritime disputes; in 2011, Hanoi and Beijing signed an agreement on general guidelines for addressing maritime conflicts, but have not progressed beyond generalities” [19]. Escalation is the order of the day. Fishing fleets are accompanied on both sides by coastal and naval patrol vessels, and interdictions often place armed assets of both nations in close proximity to one another. And both China and Vietnam have both “used state-owned petroleum companies as tools to claim disputed areas” and each has “responded rapidly to the other side's new oil and gas explorations by increasing patrols in disputed areas or cutting the cables of survey ships” [20]. Essentially, the South China Sea has been regionally militarized, but China holds the upper hand in vessels, aircraft, and capabilities. Vietnam needs a backdrop to even the tables.

### **Vietnam: A Maritime Ally**

There are numerous important elements reference a U.S. strategy towards China, which include measures such as “concertedly building up the power-political capacities of U.S. friends and allies on China's periphery” as well as “improving the capability of U.S. military forces to effectively project power along the Asian rimlands despite any Chinese opposition” [21]. This focus is a major reason why Vietnam can serve as a lynchpin in the U.S. strategy towards containment of China and furtherance of a stable footing in the Pacific theater. The U.S. must concern itself with the continued support and development of ASEAN allies, and with regards to Vietnam, the U.S. should “seek to expand the scope of activities during the annual U.S.-Vietnam naval exercises to include joint humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and/or search and rescue exercises, and make more frequent stops at the port at Cam Ranh Bay in the short term” [22]. And while “the Vietnamese regard the United States as an important check upon China...their

country's proximity to their northern giant dictates that they be cautious" [23]. This means Vietnam needs substantial support which is steady and focused.

The "maritime domain...is one of the biggest challenges Vietnam faces today in the South China Sea" and to improve this posture the U.S. can and should help Vietnam enhance its capabilities "through training of military personnel" and pursuing "opportunities for joint naval exercises" [24]. In this effort, Vietnam tends "to be led by the coast guard" as "Hanoi views the coast guard as less escalatory than the navy, which is seen more as a reserve force" [25]. Such measures indicate Vietnam's need to confront China, but also a reluctance to overtly push back due to potential repercussions of retaliation. Having an ally who can match China provides Vietnam with resolve to not necessarily be the aggressor, but to also not feel pressure to sway under Chinese oppression. Le Hong Hiep argues that "Vietnam is China's biggest rival in the South China Sea so targeting it can provide Beijing with an opportunity to test Vietnam's genuine capabilities and resolve" and "Vietnam has recently invested considerably in upgrading its navy as well as paramilitary forces, such as the Vietnam Coast Guard and the newly-established Vietnam Fisheries Resources Surveillance" [26]. Faced with a more powerful opponent, "Vietnam's restraint in using force is therefore understandable, although it might raise doubts regarding Vietnam's deterrence capabilities against China" [27]. The U.S. does not benefit from a military clash between China and Vietnam, and measures to counter this possibility include working with "Vietnam and other Southeast Asian nations to create a united position on a code of conduct" or promotion of "ASEAN-China joint economic and scientific projects in the South China Sea, such as programs to codify the marine biodiversity" which may serve as a platform for a reduction in tensions [28]. But these measures must be made from a position of strength to realistically have any measure of regard within China. Improvement of Vietnamese military and patrol capabilities, in concert with U.S. exercises "could be effective in stopping China from projecting power in ways that could provoke a confrontation with its neighbors" [29].

Analysis by *The New York Times* indicates "Vietnam's needs dovetail with those of the United States, which has been encouraging maritime states in Southeast Asia to better defend themselves, an effort partly aimed at keeping the United States from being dragged into a direct naval conflict with China" [30]. Such recent measures are highlighted by actions between the U.S. Coast Guard and Vietnam Marine Police, with "training...focused on maritime law enforcement, search and rescue and operational planning" [31]. This ties directly to governance of areas in dispute such as exploration of natural resources and harvesting of fisheries. This "capacity building has been a significant part of overall U.S. engagement in Vietnam over the past three years" and "each outreach activity has succeeded in further strengthening trust and opening the door to a broader range of activities between our two countries" [32].

## **Conclusion**

The U.S. will continue to be concerned with developments in the South China Sea, and will actively seek to check China's maneuvers to solidify itself as the central regional power through its acquisition of island territories. Simply stated, "what was once a maritime territorial dispute involving China, Vietnam, and the other littoral ASEAN states has become something more disturbing for the peace and stability of the Western Pacific" [33]. The U.S. must have regional partners, and one which also is actively seeking to check China could serve as a strong counterpart. At sea, "since 2009, when China submitted a nine-dash map to the United Nations and asserted its control over much of the South China Sea, Vietnam has begun to see the maritime domain as its most important security challenge" [34]. This serves as an opportunity for both Vietnam and the U.S. to improve relations focused upon common cause. Joshua Kurlantzick writes "...a maritime crisis between Vietnam and China could theoretically serve U.S. interests in Asia" in that "a crisis that stemmed primarily from aggressive Chinese action, and that was met with a U.S. response that prompted China to back down but averted conflict, could lead Asian nations to strengthen

military relationships with the United States” [35]. The converse is true in that “if a maritime crisis erupted and a U.S. response was ineffective, prolonging the conflict and failing to prevent China from retreating, even close U.S. partners could seek to bolster ties with China at the expense of military relations with Washington” [36]. The objective is to avoid military action. This is done through diplomacy and application of the full spectrum of DIME elements. However, far from home, the U.S. needs local support upon which joint action can be based and linked to leverage alliances in coordinated efforts to balance power, and discourage Chinese aggression against its neighbors. In the past, a nation such as the Philippines would have been the ‘go-to’ choice. In the current construct, the U.S. could truly do no better than working with Vietnam.

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## About the Author



## **Daniel Ward**

Mr. Daniel E. Ward is a former US Coast Guard officer. His work experience includes maritime and riverine operations, protective services and security operations, as well as criminal investigations. He has spent several years in Latin America and the Middle East, and has extensive work experience training indigenous forces. He holds a BS in civil engineering, and is currently pursuing a master's degree in Defense and Strategic Studies at the University of Texas at El Paso. The views presented are his own and do not represent the U.S. government, his employer, or an official position.

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