

# Vietnam's Bamboo Diplomacy: Between Beijing's Persistent Shadow and Growing Western Ties

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If one were to look solely at their highly similar government systems and cordial foreign policy statements, one might assume that China and Vietnam are the closest of allies. The fact that To Lam, who succeeded long-time paramount leader Nguyen Phu Trong as “National Chairman” (Chu tich nuoc, “president”) of Vietnam and General Secretary (Tong Bi thu) of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) following Trong’s passing in June 2024, chose China for his first state visit, reinforces this perception. Vietnam’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs further [underscored](#) this by stating that the visit “was successful in all aspects and made important contributions to promoting the building of a community with a shared future for Vietnam,” seemingly signaling Hanoi’s full embrace of Beijing’s main foreign policy concept of “community with a shared future for mankind” (*renlei minyun gongtongti*, formerly translated as “community of common destiny for mankind”).

However, during my stay in various parts of Vietnam in September and October, observations painted a starkly different picture. The centuries of “Northern domination” (Bac thuoc) were prominently featured in nearly every historical museum in Vietnam, which particularly highlight the revolts and battles that ended each phase of Chinese rule. Despite their extended duration and significant influence on the country, the more nuanced (and sometimes objectively positive) aspects of these periods are generally overlooked in favor for a stark contrast between harsh Chinese occupation and benevolent Vietnamese governance following each successful expulsion. Furthermore, as for example shown through this commentary’s cover image, maps demonstrating Vietnamese sovereignty over the “East Sea” (Bien Dong), generally known in China and beyond as the “South (China) Sea” (*Nan [Zhongguo] Hai*), were also a common feature in public locations.

Popular nationalist sentiment was particularly palpable when speaking with locals about the contested maritime region. Many Vietnamese expressed frustration over [Beijing’s persistent claim](#) that it has not engaged in warfare since the PRC’s founding in 1949. After all, having seized several islands from South Vietnam during the final moments of the Vietnam War (1974–75), Beijing, enjoying tacit approval from Washington (the enemy of my enemy...), launched a punitive surprise attack in early 1979. This was largely driven by frustration over the then-deepening Soviet-Vietnamese alliance and primarily aimed at deterring Hanoi from toppling the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, a close Chinese ally. Although China failed to save Pol Pot from his downfall, the 1979 war was followed by a decade of bloody Sino-Vietnamese border clashes which lasted until bilateral ties were finally normalized in November 1991.

The consequences of this turbulent history were especially evident to me while traversing Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). Prior to multiple anti-Chinese crackdowns following the fall of Saigon in 1975 and (especially) the 1979 war, Vietnamese of Chinese descent (Nguoi Hoa) had controlled up to 80 percent of the local economy. This once-dominant economic presence has now been reduced to a bustling but rather decrepit bazaar district still known to many as the “Big Market” (Cho Lon), while even contemporary Chinese tourists seemed to prefer the glittering skyscrapers of District One (Quan Mot).

## The US-Vietnam détente

While Vietnam primarily sought Soviet backing during much of the first period of trouble with the PRC – Moscow nowadays is still one of Hanoi’s closest friends – it gradually diversified its diplomatic portfolio after the Doi Moi (literally, “renewal”) economic liberalizations that started in 1986. Particularly after the Soviet Union’s collapse, Vietnam recognized the need to establish new alliances. It therefore strengthened its ties with other ASEAN members, South Korea, Japan, as well as most European countries, and, in 1995, even normalized relations with its former adversary the US. Despite opposition from vocal groups of anti-CPV Vietnamese diaspora in the US [still flying South Vietnam’s flag](#), relations have since progressed rapidly.

[Polls](#) show that in the eyes of most Vietnamese, the US – unlike China – poses no (more) threat to their country’s sovereignty. Under the above historical context and [escalating Sino-Vietnamese tensions](#) surrounding the South/East Sea, it also comes to little surprise that nearly 80 percent of Vietnamese nowadays favor alignment with the US over China. Especially emblematic in this regard was the port call of the USS Ronald Reagan to Da Nang in June 2023 and Vietnam’s foreign ministry’s [open invitation](#) for further US engagement in the country’s eastern waters: “Strong bilateral ties between the US and Vietnam are key for Washington if it wants to remain the dominant power in the region.” In this light, To Lam’s [visit to the US](#) shortly after his maiden trip to China appears a logical move.

## Bamboo Diplomacy: Opportunities for the EU

This pragmatic geopolitical balancing act was formalized by To Lam’s predecessor, Nguyen Phu Trong, during the 2010s, and later became known as “Bamboo Diplomacy” (Ngoai giao cay tre). The term originated in a [2016 speech](#) by Trong referencing the CPV’s founder, Ho Chi Minh, who described the Vietnamese people as having bamboo-like qualities: “flexible yet resilient, compassionate yet strong-willed, adaptable yet principled, understanding the times and circumstances, knowing oneself and others.” The message was clear: Alike bamboo, Vietnam should glide along with changing ‘winds’ and adapt pragmatically to shifting regional and international ‘gusts.’ Equally alike bamboo’s resilience, Vietnam should ensure it is never uprooted and maintain a non-aligned policy, a strategy that was also confirmed in a [2019 white paper](#) by its ministry of defense. Illustrative of this balancing approach was Vietnam’s [signing](#) of a comprehensive strategic partnership with the US in September 2023, despite simultaneously maintaining ‘neutrality with Russian sympathies’ regarding the war in Ukraine. Vietnam also [expressed its intention](#) to elevate ties with former colonizer France to similar levels in October 2024. If realized, France would join the ranks of China, Russia, India, South Korea, the US, Japan, and Australia, thereby becoming the first member state of the EU to achieve this level of bilateral relations with the country.

As economic ties between Brussels and Hanoi continue to expand, France, with its long experience in the country and region, could act as a strategic gateway for Vietnam within the EU and vice-versa. An [EU-Vietnam free trade agreement](#) that seeks to eliminate virtually all trade barriers by 2030 has already entered force in August 2020 (a simultaneously negotiated investment protection agreement still awaits the signature of several member states). As of 2023, Vietnam is the EU’s largest trading partner in goods in ASEAN, with total trade flows amounting to €64.2 billion. Adjusted for population size, these figures even slightly surpass the EU’s trade with China, despite the latter’s higher level of economic development. Vietnam also stands to gain significantly from the EU’s [new EV tariffs](#) that will be imposed on some Chinese companies starting October 31, as its own brands, like [VinFast](#) which has partnered with Bosch

to access European charging infrastructure, seek to enter and expand within the European market.

Vietnam's greatest advantage to the EU and its member states is its moderate size. The Vietnamese market is large enough to absorb a significant portion of potential trade diversion from China in the wake of the EU's decision de-risk its economic relations with the country. Furthermore, while trade tensions similar to present EU-China disputes could certainly emerge in the future as EU-Vietnam economic ties increase, Vietnam is simply not large enough to ever be perceived as a "systemic rival" in the same light as its northern neighbor. Additionally, Vietnam has yet to encounter the demographic challenges faced by its East Asian neighbors, with its demographic dividend set to continue to support rapid growth until at least the late 2030s. Finally, although Vietnam's political system remains highly repressive and authoritarian in a manner not dissimilar from China, unlike Brussels' gripes with Beijing (i.e., those concerning Xinjiang and Taiwan), human rights issues or geopolitical conflicts that could impede deeper relations with Hanoi appear absent.

On the reverse, the fact that Vietnam, while falling short of a call for compliance alike the Philippines, [positively acknowledged](#) the 2016 South China Sea Arbitration which rejects the legitimacy of the PRC's maritime claims under its nine-dash line, has presented a geopolitical opportunity for further alignment. While outright alliances are off the table under Vietnam's Bamboo Diplomacy and Hanoi has so far limited its comprehensive strategic partnerships to nation-states, Brussels seeks to benefit from further deepening its ties with the rapidly developing country. Pursuing this would be wholly in line with the Union's foreign policy bedrock of Principled Pragmatism – an outlook that strongly resonates with Vietnam's Bamboo Diplomacy.

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