**Appendix I: Definition of High-Level Exchanges**

“High-level exchange” is defined as an exchange between officials of at least two countries at the ministerial level or above. Though different countries have different numbers of ministries, noteably, there are some common ministries in almost all states, inclusing Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Minstry of Defense, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Finance, and Ministry of Education.

The following list includes all ministries and ministry-level agencies offeicially defined by the Vietnamese government.[[1]](#footnote-1)

* Ministry of National Defense
* Ministry of Public Security
* Ministry of Foreign Affairs
* Ministry of Justice
* Ministry of Finance
* Ministry of Transport
* Ministry of Construction
* Ministry of Education and Training
* Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
* Ministry of Industry and Trade
* Ministry of Planning and Investment
* Ministry of Health
* Ministry of Science and Technology
* Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment
* Ministry of Information and Communications
* Ministry of Home Affairs
* Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs
* Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism
* State Bank of Viet Nam
* Committee on Ethnic Minority Affairs

Apart from Head of state (including Premier and Vice Premier, President and Vice President), meeting with officials from equalevant departments in other political systems are coded as high-level exchanges.

In addition, given the role of the Communist Party the special political system in China, Vietnam, and Laos, we also include high-ranking officials from the following departments within the Central Commintee of the Communist Party in these countries:

* Party General Secretary
* Member of Standing Committee of the Political Bureau
* Member of Commisions under the Central Committee, such as Central Military Commission, Central Commission for Discipline Inspection,[[2]](#footnote-2) Commission for External Relations (International Department), etc.

**Appendix II: Coding Schemes of High-Level Exchange Data**

*Time Frame*

The main body of the paper focuses on the period from January 1, 2009 to June 30, 2016. We then did a second counting, from July 1, 2016 to March 30, 2020. This period is chosen for the following reason: though the South China Sea is seen now, arguably, as the most dangerous destabilizing factor in the region, competing claims did not become white-hot until 2009, when China first included a map of the nine-dashed line in a *note verbale* to the CLCS.[[3]](#footnote-3) Thus, a closer examination of texts from 2009 to date helps us focus and reveal the patterns and priorities of Vietnamese foreign and security policies in the context of rising tension regarding the South China Sea. We ended the data at March 30, 2020, because the pandemic has probably disrupted all types of meetings, and it is not clear we could draw any inferences from the data.

In robustness tests, we also analyzed data from January 2005 to December 2008 by using additional data from the National Defense White Papers of Vietnam. Published by Vietnam’s Ministry of Defense, these white papers document the timing, purposes, and details of delegation of Vietnamese major exchanges with other countries. Including or not the data before 2009 doesn’t change the pattern of high-level exchanges. Thus, for the purpose of clarity, we presented only the results post-2009 in the main-body text.

*Data Source*

The major source for data collection is *Asia News Monitor*. This source is chosen based on two reasons: first, by searching the key words “Vietnam,” “high-level,” and “exchange” in ProQuest via USC, *Asia News Monitor* is the news source that covers such events most frequently, extensively and systematically. Second, this source was identified and recommended during authors’ field interviews with local experts and journalists. All the exchanges are also cross-referenced with and supplemented by other Chinese and English sources, such as the “Activities of the Party and State” section in the online newspaper of Communist Party of Vietnam, the website of Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the “Travel” section on the websites of the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Department of Defense, section on “Bilateral Relations” on the websites of Vietnamese embassies in various countries, and news released by foreign countries’ embassies in Vietnam.

*Search Procedure*

Specifically, we search “ft(vietnam high-level visit) AND pub(Asia News Monitor)” in ProQuest, which returns 1000 pieces of news articles from Asia News Monitor. After human coding, 375 pieces of news articles are identified as codeable unduplicated events.

*Descriptors of High-level Exchange*

We code the following information for each piece of news article:

* Year
* Month
* Date
* Country B
* Incoming or Outgoing Visit
* Locale
* Position of Vietnamese Official
* Name of Vietnamese Official
* Position of Foreign Official
* Name of Foreign Official
* Brief Remarks

*High-level Exchange in Third Country*

A tricky scenario is how to count bi-lateral meeting with country i during trips made for the purpose of attending a multilateral meeting in country j. For instance, in November 2014, Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang had bilateral meetings with US President Barack Obama and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum in Beijing, China. We coded these two meetings as high-level exchanges as they were arranged specifically during the multilateral meeting and have received extensive media coverage. However, as it is unclear who requested such bi-lateral meetings, the direction of the pursuit is then counted as “unknown”, and the case is excluded from total counts when we further break the exchanges into incoming and outgoing visits.

**Appendix III. Visits from Large Powers to its Allies versus to Small Power**

Comparing the pattern of high-level exchanges between China and Vietnam with that between the U.S. and Vietnam reveals an observation that is against the conventional wisdom: we find no evidence that Vietnam is pursuing the U.S. to balance or hedge against China. On the contrary, the high frequency of total exchanges and the roughly equal amounts of incoming and outgoing visits between Vietnam and China both indicate that instead of allying with the U.S., Vietnam is more inclined to rely on bi-lateral exchanges and dialogues with China to exchange views between the two Parties and the two countries. For instance, in the first six months of 2016, Vietnamese Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister paid 2 visits to China to meet with their counterparts. Meanwhile, Chinese Defense Minister and State Councilor also visited Vietnam respectively in March and June, and were received by Vietnamese Defense Minister, Vietnamese President and the Communist Party General-Secretary. Joint statements issued during these exchanges emphasize multiple times that Vietnam and China both view the maintaining of regular high-level contacts between the two parties and states as key to strengthen political trust, and will continue to make visits on a regular basis, send Special Envoys, talk on the hotline, organize annual meetings, and hold meetings on the sidelines of multilateral forums to promptly exchanges views on regional and international issues of shared concern (Viet Nam News 2015).

The following example illustrates the atmosphere and the implications of these exchanges between China and Vietnam. In 2014, a 13-member high-level Vietnamese military delegation, led by its Minister of National Defense General Phung Quang Thanh, visited his counterparts in Beijing. Apart from usual pleasantries, General Thanh proposed five ways to rebuild confidence and trust with reassurance that “force would not be used” (Thayer 2014). Reciprocally, General Fan Changlong, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission and member of the Chinese Communist Party Politburo, urged the two militaries to contribute “positive energy.” Fan emphasized, “A neighboring country cannot be moved away…We should make our troops well-behaved” (Xinhua News 2014). As Carl Thayer points out, during these meetings, military commanders of the border and at sea on both sides had the chance to meet their respective counterparts. “These commanders have all witnessed the verbal understandings reached by their respective ministers. Military commanders on both sides can be expected to carry out their duties accordingly” (Thayer 2014).

The two cases that we chose are the historic visit of Vietnamese Party General Secretary to the U.S. in July 2015, the opening of Cam Ranh International Port in March 2015; and U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris’ visit to Vietnam in the summer of 2021. To date, these three cases have been cited widely as evidence of Vietnam tilting toward the U.S. to balance against China. However, by showing that it is the United States that eagerly wishes to increase relations with Vietnam in each case, we demonstrate that the causality of relationship between big and small powers runs the opposite way than is usually theoretically expected.

*Case 1: Unwilling to Balance against China: Vietnamese Party General Secretary’s Visit to the U.S.*

In July 2015, the United States hosted the first-ever visit by the General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party Nguyen Phu Trong. This “groundbreaking” visit has been lauded as a tipping point in the U.S.-China-Vietnam triangle, a major step forward in the quiet yet profound shift in both Vietnam’s foreign policies and domestic politics (Vuving 2015). However, what is often overlooked is that Vietnam officials often visit China right before they visit the United States. This case was no different. Vietnam was hesitant to embrace the U.S. invitation, and engaged in careful management of Chinese perceptions before embarking for the U.S. Furthermore, Vietnam-U.S. meetings are often more symbolic than substantive.

The Obama administration’s invitation to the Party General Secretary to visit the U.S. was first made public by the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on February 14, 2015, during a telephone conversation[[4]](#footnote-4) with Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh for Lunar New Year’s greetings (Asia News Monitor 2015).On February 23, this invitation was again discussed when Vietnamese Ambassador to the U.S. Pham Quang Vinh presented his credentials to President Barack Obama at the White House (Vietnam Embassy in the U.S. 2015). The Party General Secretary’s visit to the U.S. wasn’t confirmed until later by Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on February 25, 2015, with no confirmed date for the visit yet at that point (TuoiTre News 2015).

However, after confirming his U.S. visit, the General Secretary first went to Beijing in April, three months before his visit to Washington. During his four-day visit, the Party leader met with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping, Premier Li Keqiang, Chairman of the National People’s Congress Zhang Dejiang, and Chairman of the Chinese People’s Consultative Conference Yu Zhengsheng, with a particular theme of “enhancing the political trust in each other” (Xinhua News 2015a).Commentary published by Xinhua News Agency, China’s state-run news agency, on Nguyen Phu Trong’s visit is instructive. Title “No room for wedge in China-Vietnam relations,” the commentary reads:

The timing of the trip is riveting…it takes place ahead of a Washington-announced visit by Trong to the United States…top-level diplomacy between Beijing and Hanoi sends out a clear albeit delicate message… Beijing and Hanoi are mature enough to handle their relations beyond the bilateral scope. They will not chase after other interests at the cost of China-Vietnam relations, nor will they allow anybody to drive a wedge between them. Interpretations of Trong's expected U.S. trip as a move to counterbalance China smell of Cold War-era machination and confrontationalism, which should have long been dumped to the dustbin of history…China unequivocally encourages its neighbors to follow development paths and cultivate foreign relations in line with their respective realities. And it is widely accepted common sense that such pursuits should be conducive both to national development and to regional peace. (Xinhua News 2015b)

Vietnamese state-run news agency VNA, as well as the newspaper of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Nhan Dan (The People), also sent out similar messages. For example, the Vietnamese official perspective was that the trip:

…aims to continue solidifying and maintaining the friendly and stable situation, creating more momentum for healthy China-Vietnam relations and creating favorable conditions to continue resolving disputes between the two countries, contributing to the maintenance and consolidation of a peaceful and stable environment for national development and construction. (Nhan Dan 2015)

Following Trong’s visit to Beijing, and before his visit to the U.S., there were two additional high-level exchanges between Vietnam and China. During these visits, China’s State Councilor Yang Jiechi, who outranks China’s Foreign Minister, Premier Li Keqiang, Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh in Beijing and Hanoi, respectively. The importance of regular meetings between the two countries’ high-level leaders to enhance political trust was emphasized in each exchange, with multiple initiatives being set up to strengthen cooperation between ministries, sectors and localities. In addition, both sides have committed to effectively using government-level negotiation mechanisms for the Vietnam-China territorial border, and to avoiding any actions that complicate disputes in the South China Sea.

In fact, we often observe meetings between Vietnamese and Chinese leaders to precede those between leaders of Vietnam and the U.S. For instance, Vietnamese State President Truong Tan Sang visited the U.S. for the first time in July 2013. During that visit, President Truong Tan Sang and President Obama announced their decision to “form a U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership to provide an overarching framework for advancing the relationship” (White House 2013). However, President Truong Tan Sang had visited China one month earlier in June as his first-ever visit as the Head of State (Vietnam News 2013).

Another example is the postponed visit by President Obama to Vietnam. Back in 2015, when receiving Vietnam's Communist Party leader at the White House, President Obama pledged that he was looking forward to making his first visit to the nation "sometime in the future" (Nakamura 2015**).** Given President Obama was scheduled to attend an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in the Philippines and the East Asia Summit 2015 in Malaysia in November, it was widely expected that President Obama would visit also Vietnam to mark the 20th anniversary of US-Vietnam ties (Boyer 2015; Bhadrakumar 2015). However, Obama’s trip was postponed, while Vietnam welcomed Chinese President Xi with red-carpet, despite the extremely short notice of Xi’s intention to visit in November. To welcome Xi, Vietnam had to juggle the long-scheduled visits of the presidents of Italy and Iceland (CCTV News 2015; Thayer 2016). In addition, Xi was the first world leader to send a special envoy to congratulation Nguyen in person after the 12th Party congress in January 2016, and the special envoy of Nguyen was the first foreign guest Xi met after the lunar new year in 2016 (Sun 2016).

A close examination and comparison of the joint statements issued during Vietnamese leaders’ visits to China and to the U.S. further illustrates the lack of actual momentum in Vietnamese visits to the U.S. Back in July 2013, Vietnam’s president and his US counterpart agreed on nine areas of cooperation including political and economic relations, security ties, human rights, and cooperation on tackling environmental issues. However, the majority of U.S.-Vietnam military cooperation since then only involved joint efforts to address war legacies, including Agent Orange/dioxin, unexploded ordnance, the search for remains of U.S. personnel missing in action (MIA) and the provision of information about Vietnamese soldiers missing in action (Vietnam Ministry of Defense 2016). Even the annual Naval Exchange Activity (NEA), established in 2010, have been confined to noncombat training and skills exchanges in military medicine, search and rescue, maritime law, shipboard damage control, legal symposia, band concerts, community service events, and team sports (Barta 2011; Commander Task Force 73 Public Affairs 2015). With that in mind, the joint statement issued during the 2016 visit again gave priority on “humanitarian cooperation, war legacy, maritime security, peacekeeping, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief,” as well as to work towards concluding the Trans-Pacific Partnership preferential trade pact (White House 2015a).

Nor did this “ground-breaking” meeting advance the U.S.’s call for preferential access to Vietnam’s deep-sea port at Cam Ranh Bay. Right before Trong’s visit to the U.S., the U.S. had “urged Vietnamese officials to ensure that Russia is not able to use its access to Cam Ranh Bay to conduct activities that could raise tensions in the region”, including “provocative” flights near the US Pacific Ocean territory of Guam (Reuters 2015a). However, consistent with its “three no’s” policy against foreign alliances, bases or reliance, Vietnam “had no immediate response to the U.S. requests” (Reuters 2015b), nor the alleged requests that the U.S. have exclusive foreign rights to the facilities. Thus, as Shawn Crispin points out, instead of being monumental as some are making it out to be, the 2016 visit at best advanced the budding “comprehensive partnership” launched in 2013, and still remains largely symbolic and limited (Crispin 2015).

On the other hand, the joint statements issued between China and Vietnam included many more substantive cooperative projects. In the realm of military and security cooperation alone, the 2013 joint statement highlights the importance of maintaining high-level contacts between the two armies, especially the usage of the direct telephone line between the two defense ministries to enhance mutual trust. The statement also inked more joint land, sea, and naval patrols, based on the principles of easy things first and step-by-step, especially in the Tonkin Gulf. The two sides also agreed to stay calm and restrain themselves so as not to complicate and expand disputes. In the joint statement issued during Xi’s visit in 2015, the two sides spoke highly of the continued high-level exchanges between two armies, and have emphasized again the usage of the direct hotline between two defense ministries to manage and control crises at sea. They also expanded cooperation between the two armies to realms including Party and political affairs in the army, personnel training, joint patrols, visits by naval ships, as well as law enforcement at sea between the two countries' maritime police. Following these statements, the coast guards of Vietnam and China conducted two joint patrol missions in 2016 alone (in April and November, respectively), and have conducted 12 joint law enforcement exercises in the common fishing zone since 2006 (Xinhua News 2016).

In short, the unprecedented visit of Vietnamese Party General Secretary has been lauded by the Western analysis as an indicator of Vietnam’s pivoting towards the U.S., however, we found little evidence to support this argument. To be clear, we do not claim that Vietnam always seeks assurance from Beijing before moving closer to Washington. However, by pointing out that Vietnamese leaders often meet their Chinese counterparts prior to their meetings with the U.S. leaders, as well as the lack of substantive progress in defense cooperation after Vietnamese leaders’ visits to the U.S., we argue that small powers like Vietnam can be, and have indeed been, very versatile and strategic in handling their relationships with the large powers. Instead of allying with one to balance or hedge against the other, they instead can have a surprising amount of autonomy and agency in maneuvering among large powers.

*Case 2: Active Pursuit from the U.S.: The Opening of Cam Ranh International Port*

The second case that we examine is the recent opening of Cam Ranh International Port. On March 8, 2016, Vietnam officially inaugurated an international port facility capable of receiving foreign warships at Cam Ranh Bay, a war-time naval base considered as the finest deepwater shelter in Southeast Asia. This, again, has been lauded as Vietnam’s offering to the U.S. and its allies with the aim to signal and balance against an increasingly aggressive China. However, by tracing progress happening before this opening, we find that it is the United States that is asking for more access to naval bases and Cam Ranh Bay, while Vietnam has been carefully evaluating the implication, and has been constantly refusing requests from the U.S. on exclusive foreign rights to the facilities.

U.S. warships began making port visits to Vietnam in November 2003 (Gordon 2003), but were limited to Saigon, Danang and Haiphong. The United States is keen to gain access to Cam Ranh Bay, arguably, that parallel its arrangements to ports elsewhere. However, given the delicate balance in its foreign policy approach, Vietnam has been cautious about developing over-reliance on any one major power on the security front. Thus, despite speculation, no actual evidence was revealed that Vietnam would allow this request.

The first breakthrough in accessing to Cam Ranh Bay was made in October 2010. At the closing conference of the 17th ASEAN summit in Hanoi, Vietnamese senior officials announced that Vietnam would rent out its services to foreign navies on a commercial basis. However, Vietnam also made it clear that it would be solely responsible for developing Cam Ranh Port, and will not cooperate with any country that wants to use the port for military purposes, let alone granting any single country all-access usage of the port facilities (Thanhnien News 2010). By August 2011, when the first U.S. logistics vessel docked at the port for repairs, it appeared that Vietnam has declined U.S. interest to gain basing rights, storage or logistical arrangements at Cam Ranh Bay (Baxter 2011).

The first symbolic trip made by the U.S. to visit Cam Ranh Bay was in June 2012, when the then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta recognized the 17th anniversary of the normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam on the deck of the Military Sealift Command supply ship USNS Richard E. Byrd at Cam Ranh Bay. During his speech, Panetta reiterated that the United States would “work with our partners like Vietnam to be able to use harbors like this as we move our ships from our ports on the West Coast toward our stations here in the Pacific.” “Access for United States naval ships into this facility is a key component of this relationship [with Vietnam] and we see a tremendous potential here for the future," Panetta emphasized (Baldor 2012).

In May 2014, the U.S. openly called upon Vietnam to permit more than the single annual U.S. Navy port visit to Vietnam that is currently allowed. As yet, the Vietnamese have not accepted the offer, saying “We're talking to U.S. but it is too early to say how the tensions now will change our approach…We have a lot to consider” (Reuters 2014). Although U.S. Defense Secretary Panetta asked the Vietnamese to create an “Office of Defense Cooperation” housed in the U.S. Embassy in Vietnam, the Vietnamese have not yet approved the request (Thayer 2013). Even till the opening of Cam Ranh International Port, Vietnam only allows the U.S. Navy a single port visit each year, and bars U.S. Navy warships from entry to Cam Ranh Bay. Instead, Vietnam consistently advocates neither joining any military alliances nor giving any other countries permission to have military bases or use its soil to carry out military activities against other countries (Vietnam Ministry of Defense 2013).

To further push for regular access to Vietnamese ports, the chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee has proposed a 2-2-3 plan – or the so-called “McCain Initiative” – an offer for a regular series of bilateral naval exercises in which a U.S. ship would conduct a two-day port visit to Da Nang, two days of at-sea exercises and three days of in-port visits at Cam Ranh Bay (LaGrone 2016). Senator John McCain also sent a letter to Vietnamese Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong, in which he called for increased US Naval port visits to Vietnam and emphasized that he was “committed to helping build the maritime capacity of the Vietnamese Coast Guard and Navy” (LaGrone 2016). Echoing that, the U.S. government has awarded Vietnam $19.6 million in FY 2015 and $20.5 million in FY 2016, respectively,as part of its Maritime Security Initiative in order to “bolster its maritime Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) and command and control within Vietnam’s maritime agencies” (White House 2015b). Vietnam has not yet accepted this proposal, again one stemming from the United States, not Vietnam.

One case study illustrates that in the case of Vietnam, it is the U.S. who is the suitor that hopes for a closer relationship, while Vietnam has been hesitant to embrace that pursuit. On August 25, 2021, U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris made the first-ever official visit to Vietnam by a Vice President. As has been typical with Vietnam-US high-level visits, the Vietnamese also welcomed Chinese high-level diplomats either right before the Americans. In this case, Vietnam hosted a Chinese diplomat with lower status than Vice President Harris – the Chinese ambassador to Vietnam -- with an equally high stature visit with the Vietnamese Prime Minister. On August 24th, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh held an meeting with Chinese Ambassador Xiong Bo, during which the Chinese ambassador donated 2 million doses of Covid-19 vaccinations to Vietnam. For his part, Prime Minister Chinh said “The Prime Minister affirmed that Vietnam adheres to an independent, self-reliant, multilateral, and diverse foreign policy and is a responsible member of the international community. does not align itself with one country against another” (Pearson and Bose 2021). In what appeared to be a message directed at the United States, Vietnamese Prime Minister said that “Vietnam does not pick sides, it picks what is just. Vietnam’s foreign policy should be like Vietnamese bamboo, resolute but flexible” (Pearson and Bose 2021). The remark could be interpreted as a reassurance to the Chinese, and a caution to the United States, that Vietnam would not be openly joining the United States at any point in the near future.

The next day, August 25, Harris visited Vietnam, in which Harris donated one million Prfizer vaccines to Vietnam. Furthermore, as has been typical, it was the U.S. side that has brought up the possibility of upgrading their relationship from a “comprehensive” partnership to a “strategic” partnership. When Vice President Harris met President Nguyen Xuan Phuc, it was Harris who brought up the possibility, saying “I would also ask that, while we are here, that we consider doing what we can to upgrade our relationship as a strategic partnership” (US Embassy 2021). Vietnam was also one of only two Southeast Asian nations explicitly mentioned in the Biden administration’s *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* report as central to “advance shared objectives” in the Indo-Pacific (White House 2021, 10).

1. Source: Government Portal of Vietnam. <http://www.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/English/ministries> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This list is based on the organization chart of the Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party. Source: <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/18th_CPC_National_Congress_Eng/t989630.htm>. These organizations are also shared by Vietnanmese Communist Party, with minor differences. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Limits in the Seas. No. 143. China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea. Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs. United States Department of State. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. During the lunar new year celebration of 2015, Vietnam had only three phone conversation with foreign countries: China, Japan, and the U.S. The phone talk with China was between Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping on February 11, during which they agreed to visit their respective countries in 2015. Conversation with Japan was between Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, during which Japan committed to continuing to provide official development assistance (ODA) for Vietnamese socio-economic development and TPP. Conversation with the U.S. was conducted by Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister, who has lowest ranking in terms of official profiles. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)