HSC
Human Security Centre

7th October 2014

The Case for a US-Vietnam Alliance

By Rowan Allport

7th October 2014, Security and Defence, Issue 4 No. 3

Last month, US Senator and Vietnam War veteran John McCain tweeted a picture of himself holding a cappuccino outside the first Starbucks to open in Hanoi, the Vietnamese capital. Although intended as a humorous statement as to how even one of the last notional bastions of communism could not escape the arch-capitalist franchise, the picture also had further symbolism. Whilst both Vietnam and the US suffered a massive trauma as a result of the conflict between the two countries, the status the war occupies today is more as a set of personal tragedies than a cultural and institutional monolith that defines the relationship between the two countries. Indeed, the hiatus in US-Vietnamese links was remarkably brief in the context of the ongoing US disputes with North Korea and Cuba that began in the same era: full diplomatic relations were restored in 1995, just twenty years after the end of the war. The US Navy, from whose ships McCain had flown an attack aircraft to bomb targets in the country before getting shot down, began port visits to Vietnam in 2003. However, the remarkable fact that Vietnam is today one of the most pro-US nations in the world - with 76 per cent of the population having a favourable attitude to the country - may also now allow for the type of cooperation that would not only provide for mutual security gains, but also ease the process of the Vietnamese population freeing itself from the communist government that has dominated the country since 1975.

Whilst the Islamic State and Russia's foray into Ukraine are currently the leading items on Washington D.C.'s foreign policy agenda, it is the challenge that the People's Republic of China presents to the US and its allies in the Asia-Pacific region that dominates its horizon. Unofficially, US policy towards China is built around a system of 'soft containment'. Diplomatically, this entails the US providing support to its allies in the region so they do not feel obliged to defer to China's overwhelming relative power, whilst simultaneously politically engaging with China in an attempt to integrate it into the international system. Militarily, it means that the US is developing a series of strategies - notably AirSea Battle and Offshore Control - to contain any attempted Chinese military offensive. This policy has been given life by the US Pivot to Asia - a plan that will, in theory, see the security focus of the US shift away from Europe and the Middle East and towards Southeast Asia.

7th October 2014

The soft power component of the pivot has seen the US move to enhance its ties with its existing partners in the Asia-Pacific region, whilst increasingly reaching out to countries that have traditionally been less firmly in the US camp. In large part, this strategy has been economics-based. Having recently implemented a free trade agreement with South Korea, the US is already eyeing a far larger Trans-Pacific Partnership, a free trade deal that would potentially encompass the US, Canada, Australia, Brunei, Chile, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam, Japan and South Korea. Agreements regarding energy development and enhanced engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are also part of the mix. In addition, the US has sought to reach out to China itself via the 2009 establishment of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue. Direct ties between the US and Chinese militaries have also been significantly upgraded.

In the context of hard power, 2011 saw the US sign a deal with Australia to significantly expand its military footprint in the country. Although far from the potential conflict zone, Australia has the ability to provide the US military with the type of (relatively) secure logistics hub that would be needed in the event of a war in the South or East China Seas. Closer to China, an agreement with Singapore has resulted in the basing of a number of US ships in the country. New weapons sales have also been made to already established US allies: South Korea and Japan will both receive the F-35 fighter aircraft, and Taiwan is in the midst of taking delivery of new equipment that will allow the country to better defend itself. In addition, the US territory of Guam is about to see a massive expansion of its military facilities. By 2020, the Pentagon expects that 60 per cent of US naval assets will be based in the Asia-Pacific region.

The notional China containment 'line' itself currently runs roughly along the South Korea-Japan-Taiwan-Philippines axis. South Korea and Japan are, of course, wealthy and heavily armed states with which the US has mutual defence agreements. Taiwan's situation is rather more complex given that Beijing considers it a 'rogue province', but at the same time this means that it has more reason than most to wish to see Chinese power curtailed. And whilst the Philippines spectacularly kicked US forces out of the country in 1991, this year saw Manila sign a ten year defence agreement with the US that will see both the prepositioning of US military supplies in the country and greatly enhanced defence collaboration.

Unfortunately, the southern end of the containment chain suffers from serious limitations. The Philippine Air Force currently has no combat aircraft: even when twelve FA-50 light

fighters recently ordered from South Korea are delivered, it will still not be in a position to provide meaningful resistance to an aggressor. The Philippine Navy's main combat units are a destroyer that saw service in World War Two and a pair of old US Coast Guard cutters. None of this would be of immense importance if it was not for the fact that the Philippines is the US ally closest to the Spratly and Paracel Islands, arguably the two major regional flashpoints in a complex web of local sovereignty disputes. This veritable variety pack of conflict has lately been agitated by Chinese attempts to enforce a vast - and legally ludicrous - set of territorial claims. This month, it became apparent that China seems to be in the midst of a vast dredging operation to transform a number of the Spratly Islands - a collection of tiny atolls claimed by China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Brunei and Malaysia - into locations capable of sustaining permanent (if rather exposed) Chinese bases. Whilst not a crisis in isolation, recent provocative interceptions of US aircraft in international airspace and last year's declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone in the East China Sea, point to a pattern of China testing the boundaries of the region's security actors.

Ironically, whilst the US is seen as China's great competitor, it is Vietnam - a fellow communist state and slayer of the American superpower - that now arguably faces the greatest challenge from Beijing. Never diplomatically close despite the support the People's Republic of China provided to North Vietnam during the Vietnam War, the two countries fought a brief boarder conflict in 1979. Although relations subsequently warmed - particularly in the economic sphere - periodic spats over territories in the South China Sea have also seen flashes of tension. However, Vietnamese uneasiness is not simply concern over the fate of a few atolls: whilst the country's Politburo is split regarding policy towards China, many in the leadership have an underlying fear that China may continue to enhance its military and economic power until it becomes the almost unquestioned master of the region.

Lacking any strategic alliances, Vietnam has begun to utilise its limited resources to manage the challenge China presents. The country's navy is in the midst of taking delivery of six Kilo-class submarines from Russia, a remarkable development given that Vietnam has little experience in operating submarines. Additional fighter aircraft, air defence systems and anti-ship missiles are also on order. However, whilst such enhancements give the potential for Hanoi to complicate any operation China attempted against the country, Vietnam - with a population only 1/15 that of China - is ill-positioned to act alone. But as a partner in the current broader (if largely informal) regional defence arrangement backstopped by the US, it

would offer important capabilities that are currently lacking in the local area, in large part due to the weakness of the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

There is of course a significant degree of political hazard to any formal US-Vietnamese alliance. There is no escaping the fact that Vietnam is a deeply authoritarian state, and US experiences in the Middle East have shown the risk of such alliances of convenience - invariably supported by discredited but inexplicably ever-present "realist" foreign policy experts - eventually turning into near-unmanageable disasters. However, there are several arguments that mitigate this point. Firstly, whilst unpleasant, the current Vietnamese government is hardly from the same mould as those in Saudi Arabia or Syria. Secondly, the US has successfully managed its relationships with South Korea and Taiwan during both their authoritarian and democratic eras, and it may be possible to replicate this success. Thirdly, there is some tentative evidence that the current government in Vietnam may be reaching the end of the line anyway. The country's most recent attempt at constitutional reform in 2013 fell well short of genuine progress towards democracy, and in August the authorities jailed three democracy activists for between two and a half and three years for 'obstructing traffic'. However, there are signs that even individuals within the Communist Party are starting to see the writing on the wall: this summer saw an open letter from a notable group of ruling party members calling on the country's leaders to "develop a truly democratic, law-abiding state". Ironically, this latest wave of calls for reform was not triggered by the country's falling economic growth rate or corruption, but by the perceived inadequacy of the manner in which the Vietnamese government handled the latest confrontation with China. In any transition, a Vietnam-allied US would be well placed to act as a trusted third party to provide the departing regime with a soft landing: most importantly by encouraging - at the appropriate moment - the current senior leadership to relinquish power quietly by providing assurances of their safety. US technical and financial aid would, no doubt, also be welcome by a new government.

There would of course be a level of risk in bringing Vietnam and its baggage into the fold. However, an appropriate level of internationalisation of Vietnam's disputes with China could act as a force for mutual restraint: Vietnam would have a level of reassurance that would allow it to negotiate without fear of being walked over, and China would have to incorporate the now expanded implications of a conflict with Vietnam into its cost-benefit analysis. Within Vietnam, claims by pro-democracy activists that 'the regime could collapse quickly' are likely wide of the mark. But evidence does seem to suggest that there is a general

realisation at all levels of society that major change is needed, and if even Burma can start to move beyond decades of oppression, there is no reason to suspect that Vietnam is incapable of doing the same. If handled correctly, the potential for the US to juxtaposition the issues of containing China and democratisation in Vietnam could offer the prospect of a massive and almost cost-free foreign policy success.

Rowan Allport is contactable at:
Rowan.allport@hscentre.org

Please cite this article as:
Allport, A. (2014). 'The Case for a US-Vietnam Alliance' Human Security Centre, Defence and Security, Issue 4, No. 3.