



# Post-Vietnam War Peacebuilding: A Path to Regional Stability

By: NGUYEN Van Anh | Apr 10<sup>th</sup>, 2024



*Figure 1: U.S. Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Vietnamese Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son in Washington D.C., March 25, 2024. IMAGE/ State Department.*

## Introduction

Since the American-Vietnamese normalization in 1995, both nations have not only strengthened political connections but have also embraced cultural exchanges, highlighted by the recent upgrade in their diplomatic relationship to the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2023 and the expanded Memorandum of Cooperation in the beginning of 2024.<sup>1</sup> Those impressive outcomes result from the U.S.-Vietnam multifaceted joint efforts by both governmental and private initiatives. Since 1995, numerous official

and civic actions from both nations have been executed to address the scars left by years of conflict and to pave the way for a future of stability and growth.<sup>2</sup> By analyzing the contributions and collaborations between Vietnam and the U.S. in the post-war era, this article aims to shed light on the complex tapestry of peacebuilding efforts that have contributed to the bilateral journey toward reconciliation and development.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, given the long-lasting grievances resulting from the war that has been haunting several international relations, the insights into the mechanisms of peacebuilding between the U.S. and Vietnam are expected to inform current and future endeavors in similar contexts, highlighting the significance of cooperative efforts in achieving lasting peace to contribute to the Indo-Pacific regional stability.<sup>4</sup>

### **Historical Context**

The Vietnam War, concluded in 1975 with the fall of Saigon, leaving behind a nation longing for social healing and reconstruction. Unfortunately, Vietnam encountered multiple hardships due to its international isolation caused by the U.S. and its allies' economic sanctions alongside its strained international relations resulting from the Cambodian intervention in 1978, the Sino-Vietnamese War (1979), and the Alignment of the Soviet Bloc in the late 1980s.<sup>5</sup> Although the Communist Party of Vietnam attempted to navigate the nation to pursue a trajectory of socialist reconstruction, the path was fraught with challenges including the reintegration of veterans to the repatriation of displaced individuals and the monumental task of rehabilitating infrastructure and agricultural systems.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the period after the cessation of the Vietnam War posed a

comprehensive peacebuilding mission to Vietnam ranging from its national reconciliation to reintegration into the international community. Despite the aforementioned hurdles, in 1986, Vietnam started to adopt a series of reforms known as *Đổi Mới*. These reforms spurred remarkable economic growth, attracting foreign investment and facilitating international trade.<sup>7</sup> Later, the remarkable moment came in 1995 with the normalization of diplomatic relations with the U.S., symbolizing Vietnam's burgeoning integration into the global community and underscoring its strategic stature within the Indo-Pacific domain.<sup>8</sup>



*Figure 2: U.S. Ambassador Marc Knapper met with Vietnamese veteran Mr. Vũ Đắc Tức and personally delivered the diary that was lost 50 years ago during the war. IMAGE/ U.S. Embassy /Vietnam*

## **Peacebuilding Efforts: A Multifaceted Approach**

The collaborative efforts, conducted in both top-down and bottom-up approaches in a wide range of facets, between Vietnam and the U.S. emerged as a milestone of the international peacebuilding processes.

#### **a. Economic Reconstruction**

The aftermath of the Vietnam War subjected Vietnam to urgent economic reconstruction. Recognizing the daunting challenges, the Vietnamese government, under the leadership of the Communist Party, decided to adopt a series of economic reforms called *Đổi Mới* in 1986. This policy marked a pivotal shift towards the market-oriented economy where Vietnam found its way to integrate into the global economy. For example, due to the collective ownership principles, Vietnam's agriculture sector had to witness food shortages in the late 1970s.<sup>9</sup> However, adhering to the land reforms, the authority completely abandoned collectivization for the sake of returns to self-managed families. Moreover, in an attempt to get rid of being internationally isolated, the Vietnamese government concentrated on liberalizing trade and foreign investment as well as opening foreign exchange floors at the State Bank of Vietnam.<sup>10</sup>

With those prior efforts towards economic rehabilitation, Vietnam gradually reaffirmed its position at the international scale, which set the stage for deeper U.S.-Vietnam collaboration. Vietnam's integration into the world economy experienced significant growth, evidenced by the rise of nearly 75 times in its exports from \$293.5 million during the period of 1981-1985 to nearly \$22 billion during 2000-2005.<sup>11</sup> Recognizing the potential for a mutually beneficial relationship, the U.S., which had previously imposed a trade embargo on Vietnam following the Vietnam War, began to lift these

restrictions in the early 1990s, culminating in the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1995.<sup>12</sup> Such normalization was a cornerstone for further cooperation to flourish including the Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) signed in 2000 which played a role as a bilateral trade booster and a symbol of a new era of economic cooperation.<sup>13</sup>

### **b. Political Stabilization**

The U.S.-Vietnam diplomatic normalization was strongly marked by gradual steps of engagement, trust-building, and negotiation. The initial efforts focused mostly on humanitarian concerns which provided a common ground for dialogues and projects regarding the findings and repatriation of the prisoners of war (POWs) and those missing in action (MIAs). For instance, the U.S.-Vietnam collaborated in Joint Field Activities in the 1980s to locate, recover, and repatriate the remains of the US service members missing in Vietnam.<sup>14</sup> Due to the direct engagement with the U.S., in July 1995, the formal announcement of the normalization of diplomatic relations marked the culmination of their bilateral efforts.

The diplomatic normalization between the U.S. and Vietnam not only reinforced the political stabilization within Vietnam but also promoted its legitimacy and sovereignty on the world stage. For example, the U.S.-Vietnam reconciliation forged Vietnam's participation in APEC, which created several opportunities for Vietnam to engage with major economies, including the US.<sup>15</sup> With its commitment to economic integration, free trade, and sustainable development in the Asia-Pacific region, Vietnam simultaneously stabilizes its economy and politics as well as solidifies its role as a proactive and responsible member of the international community.

The official normalization also contributed to altering the geopolitical dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region, as Vietnam emerged as a key player in promoting regional security, cooperation, and economic development.

### **c. Social Healing**

“The war is still going on in the U.S., it will not end until this generation (of veterans) is gone” - said Mr. Kurtz - a Vietnam War veteran experiencing the deep societal division within the U.S. in the post-conflict era.<sup>16</sup> Despite such a “war” back home, the veterans’ community itself has been playing a key role in fostering the reconciliation process between the two former adversaries. The return of American veterans to Vietnam has been a cornerstone of the social healing process. For instance, an American veteran whose name is Donahue, a member of the national organization Vietnam Veterans Against the War, successfully raised funds to build a library for middle school-aged students in Quang Ngai province as a form of repatriation.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, Mr. Barry - a guest speaker on Vodcast shared that he had been working on publishing numerous books and poems alongside his job as a journalist to inform people of the brutal wars taking place in Southeast Asia and the severe impacts of Agent Orange.<sup>18</sup> These actions, deeply personal yet profoundly political, underscore the veterans' unique role in transforming former battlefields into sites of peace and cooperation.

Beyond the civic actions, the official collaborative projects between the US and Vietnam on addressing the war’s legacies have been a critical aspect of social healing. Firstly, as one of the remarkable collaborative efforts between

the Vietnamese government and international NGOs under significant support from the US government, the so-called Project RENEW (Restoring the Environment and Neutralizing the Effects of the War) has been working constantly on reducing the dangers of unexploded ordnance to make the lands habitable. Its activities involve UXO clearance, mine risk education, and victim assistance.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, the US-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin, established in 2007, brings together stakeholders from both nations to address the consequences of Agent Orange used during the Vietnam War. With tremendous funding from USAID, in 2018, this group completed a mission of cleaning up dioxin-contaminated soil and sediment at Da Nang Airport, one of the heavily contaminated sites.<sup>20</sup> The joint endeavors, despite encountering several challenges, emphasize the potential for scientific collaboration and humanitarian assistance to foster goodwill and trust between nations once divided by war.

### **Implication for the Indo-Pacific Region**

The reconciliation between the U.S. and Vietnam is considered to have been reshaping the patterns of cooperation and competition within the Indo-Pacific. This transformation is particularly remarkable given the historical context of the Vietnam War and its Cold War underpinnings, which had once positioned Vietnam largely within the sphere of Soviet influence, contributing to regional divisions e.g., the Sino-Vietnamese conflict. Hence, the normalization of relations between Vietnam and the powerhouse - the US in 1995, filled by a deepening of economic and strategic ties, has not only fostered Vietnam's integration into the global economy but also turned it into a pivotal player in Southeast Asian diplomacy.

Vietnam's role in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), bolstered by its constantly enhanced relationship with the US, illustrates the country's increased influence in advocating for a rules-based regional order, especially concerning contentious issues like the South China Sea disputes. For example, Vietnam's response to China's deployment of the oil rig Haiyang Shiyou 981 into waters near the Paracel Islands was calling for dialogue and rallying international support for a peaceful resolution.<sup>21</sup> The US-Vietnam reconciliation, therefore, indirectly contributes to the upholding of rules-based regional order as well as challenges the traditional dichotomies of power politics in the Indo-Pacific, suggesting that nuanced multifaceted diplomacy can gain significant dividends in terms of peace and development.

### **Remaining Challenges**

Despite several achievements in the US-Vietnam reconciliation process, there remain some challenges in the aspects of geopolitics and social healing. While Vietnam has sought to balance its relations with major powers, including the US and China, such a diplomatic balancing act has presented challenges, especially concerning territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Concurrently, Vietnam's deepening ties with the U.S., characterized by increased security cooperation and economic engagement, serve as a counterbalance to Chinese influence but also necessitate careful diplomatic navigation to avoid escalating tensions with its Northern neighbor. Hence, Vietnam must be cautious to ensure that the partnership with the US does not provoke strategic friction with China.



On the societal level, a concern that was expressed by two Vietnam War veterans, Mr. Kurtz and Mr. Barry, is the younger generations being increasingly distanced by time from the Vietnam War.<sup>22</sup> This shift in attention risks overshadowing the profound legacies of the Vietnam War, including the lessons it offers in conflict resolution, diplomacy, and the importance of healing from societal divisions. To address this challenge, our guest speakers partook in educational activities such as holding dialogues with the students or teaching to ensure that the war's legacies are remembered and learned from. By engaging with the veterans, the younger generations are expected to apply the lessons to contemporary issues to promote peace and reconciliation.

### **Conclusion**

The reconciliation journey between the US and Vietnam illustrates the significant capacity for healing and partnership beyond historical conflicts. A remarkable multifaceted process underpinned by mutual diplomatic efforts, economic reconstruction, and poignant societal healing, has not only reinforced the bilateral relationship but also contributed drastically to the regional dynamics within the Indo-Pacific. Particularly notable is the active role of American veterans who, in one way or another, have been committing to peacebuilding and reconciliation in Vietnam. Their actions underscore the importance of Track II diplomacy which places its focus on individual contributions to the broader effort of reconciliation.

As this partnership has never stopped evolving, it serves as a paradigm for the Indo-Pacific, demonstrating that through sustained collaboration and understanding, former adversaries can forge a peaceful

future with mutual prosperity. The U.S.-Vietnam joint efforts in addressing not only the remnants of the past conflicts but also contemporary challenges offer valuable lessons for global peacebuilding endeavors.

### **Author's Bio**

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