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Explaining US Strategic Partnerships in the Asia-Pacific Region: Origins, Developments and Prospects

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Since the mid-1990s, strategic partnerships have emerged as a new form of alignment between states, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. Yet only recently has the United States begun to pursue such relationships, especially under the Obama administration which has signed new partnerships with Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia and New Zealand. As a result, the current literature does not yet include significant study on how the United States views strategic partnerships. This article attempts to fill this gap by exploring the emergence of strategic partnerships as a new form of alignment in US strategy in the Asia Pacific under the Obama administration. Drawing on the existing literature on alignment, government documents, as well as conversations with policymakers from the United States and Southeast Asia, it argues that Washington is pursuing strategic partnerships as part of a deliberate effort to both enlist target countries to share the burden in addressing challenges and to institutionalize its relationships in the Asia Pacific. It constructs an original three-part analytical framework to understand how US policymakers conceive, craft and evaluate strategic partnerships in the Asia Pacific and applies it to analyse the similarities and differences in US partnerships with Indonesia and Vietnam.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, US foreign policy, alliances, strategic partnership, rebalance, pivot.

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Since the end of the rigid bipolar structure of the Cold War, there has been a growing focus on looser alignments between countries in addition to traditional alliances.[1] One of these forms of alignments which has proliferated in the Asia-Pacific region is the strategic partnership: a loose, structured and multifaceted framework of cooperation between two parties.[2] While strategic partnerships were initially employed by major Asian powers such as China and Japan, as well as by emerging powers like India and Indonesia, recently, the United States, the primary alliance builder since the end of the Second World War, has begun to use them more frequently, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region.[3] Yet while there has been some discussion and debate about the value of these partnerships with specific states, the existing literature does not include a comprehensive study about why US strategic partnerships have arisen and how Washington conceptualizes them.[4]

This article attempts to fill this gap by exploring the emergence of strategic partnerships as a new form of alignment in US strategic thinking in the Asia Pacific under the Barack Obama administration.[5] Drawing on the existing literature on alignment, government documents, as well as conversations with policymakers, it argues that Washington is pursuing strategic partnerships as part of a deliberate effort to both enlist target countries to share the burden in addressing common challenges and to institutionalize and structure its relationships with Asia-Pacific countries. It constructs a three-part framework to understand the origins, development, and evaluation of US strategic partnerships and then applies it to analyse two US partnerships in Southeast Asia: Indonesia and Vietnam.

The article is divided into six parts. The first two sections introduce the topic and define strategic partnerships relative to traditional alliances. The third section explores the reasons why Washington is using these partnerships more widely in the Obama administration. The fourth and fifth sections develop a framework to explain the origins, development and evaluation of US strategic partnerships and then apply it to the two case studies. A sixth and final section offers some brief conclusions.

Defining Strategic Partnerships

Despite the proliferation of strategic partnerships, there have only been a few comprehensive attempts to define them. I draw on but modify Thomas Wilkins' conception of a strategic partnership and define it as a loose but structured framework of collaboration between

parties to address common challenges and to seize opportunities in several areas.[6] I address four key components of the definition in greater detail below, explaining both their traits as well as how they differ from traditional alliances.

Before delving into the specifics, however, a brief word on terminology is necessary. Countries have used a variety of terms for the partnerships they sign with states, including "strategic partnerships", "comprehensive partnerships" and "comprehensive strategic partnerships". Some, like Vietnam, have even developed and publicly articulated the differences between these different designations, which are due to a range of factors including the history of individual relationships and assessments about the current state of cooperation.[7] While recognizing that these nuances exist, this section explores the definitional features of these partnerships more generally and hence uses the term "strategic partnerships" as an umbrella term. The next section also elaborates on how these different designations are viewed from a US policy perspective.

First, strategic partnerships are a loose form of alignment, entailing a much lower level and less binding commitment relative to tighter ones like alliances. This flexible, non-binding nature of strategic partnerships is arguably their main attraction. As John Ciorciari argues, in a post-Cold War world, most developing countries prefer this kind of "limited alignment" because it allows them to reap the rewards, such as economic or security assistance, without the attendant risks such as the loss of autonomy.[8] For example, while the Sino-Russian strategic partnership of 1996 — the first strategic partnership to receive significant attention — was based on a common belief in multipolarity in a US-dominated post-Cold War world, Russian vice foreign minister Aleksandr Losyukov was careful to clarify that Russia and China "reserve the right to act freely".[9]

Second, strategic partnerships are a structured framework of collaboration between parties. What makes strategic partnerships markedly different from normal diplomatic exchanges, according to Vidya Nadkarni, is "the structure of sustained and regularized interactions underpinned by multiple webs of institutionalization at the intergovernmental level that they encompass".[10] The exact nature of this structure may vary, but the outlines of it are usually embedded in the joint statements which identify areas of cooperation, the main agencies involved and the mechanisms created to advance collaboration. For instance, the US-India strategic

partnership is structured under the overarching framework of the US-India Strategic Dialogue, the capstone annual dialogue between the two countries which gives both sides a chance to review cooperation under five "pillars" of focus and more than 20 working groups connecting various agencies.[11]

Third, the main purpose of strategic partnerships is to both address common challenges and seize joint opportunities, rather than countering a particular country or group. In traditional Realist thought, the main function of alliances is to balance the growth of another state's power or to respond to the threat emanating from it.[12] Alliances are thus, as George Liska famously said, "against, and only derivatively for, someone or something".[13] Strategic partnerships, by contrast, are primarily instruments for countries to pursue opportunities for selective engagement with as many partners as possible without alienating others. Consequently, strategic partnerships can be understood as primarily "goal-driven" rather than "threat-driven" arrangements.[14] This feature is especially appealing for some emerging powers because they are able to sign partnerships with both China and the United States without alienating the other. For instance, all three of the United States' newer comprehensive partners in Southeast Asia — Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia — are also simultaneously comprehensive strategic partners with China.[15]

Fourth, and lastly, strategic partnerships are multidimensional, involving collaboration in several areas. This is in stark contrast to alliances, which have traditionally been defined as agreements focused mainly on military or security cooperation.[16] For instance, when the Philippines and Japan declared their strategic partnership in 2011, the joint statement focused on bilateral cooperation in three main areas — economic, political-security issues and people-to-people ties — along with regional and international issues such as regional economic cooperation and UN peacekeeping.[17] This comprehensive focus — both in terms of the various functional areas of cooperation as well as addressing the bilateral, regional and global levels — is typical of strategic partnerships more generally.

The Origins of US Strategic Partnerships in the Obama Administration

Over the last five years, in the Asia-Pacific region alone the Obama administration has institutionalized existing strategic partnerships

with India and Singapore and inked new partnerships with Indonesia, New Zealand, Vietnam and Malaysia. This section argues that the growing use of strategic partnerships in the Asia Pacific is a deliberate move by US policymakers to both enlist important target countries to share the burden in addressing regional and global challenges as well as to institutionalize and structure Washington's Asia-Pacific relationships.

Before elaborating on the main point of this section, it is important to say a few words about the terminology that has been employed for these US partnerships. Technically speaking, the Obama administration has used the term "strategic partnership" for India, Singapore and New Zealand and "comprehensive partnership" for Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia. Conversations with US policymakers who have dealt with these partnerships, however, revealed that the designation of "comprehensive partnership", rather than "strategic partnership", reflected the preferences of these individual countries as these relationships are negotiated, rather than a different designation that Washington chose to consciously adopt on its part. A target country's preference for a "comprehensive partnership" rather than a "strategic partnership" could arise due to a variety of reasons, including the history of the country's relationship with the United States as well as assessments of the current state of bilateral cooperation relative to other nations.[18] For example, in the case of the United States and Vietnam, Carlyle Thayer has argued that Hanoi may have eventually preferred a "comprehensive partnership" to a "strategic partnership" for several reasons including differences with Washington over its human rights record and opposition from conservative elements who continue to view the United States with suspicion partly due to the legacy of the Vietnam War.[19] Since this article approaches the topic from a US policy perspective, however, and US officials themselves tend to use these terms interchangeably for analytical purposes, the term "strategic partnerships" will be adopted as a convenient umbrella term in this paper despite an appreciation for the nuances already elaborated.

Alliance theorists have long recognized the importance of burden sharing.[20] A similar logic can be said to govern looser alignments like strategic partnerships as well as they also focus on addressing common challenges. The Obama administration indicated very early on that burden-sharing was an important reason for pursuing strategic partnerships with key countries in a world where challenges like terrorism and climate change were too complex

for a single country to address. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, D.C. in July 2009, said the administration would try to create a "multi-partner world" and that it would place "special emphasis" on emerging powers such as India and Indonesia "to be full partners in tackling the global agenda".[21] The US Defense Department's 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) also reflected the same spirit, noting that "in an increasingly interdependent world, challenges to common interests are best addressed in concert with like-minded allies and partners who share responsibility for fostering peace and security". That document went on to explicitly note that, "in Southeast Asia, we are working to … deepen our partnership with Singapore, and develop new strategic relationships with Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam".[22]

The burden-sharing imperative in the Obama administration was not just the product of foreign policy innovation but was arguably dictated, or at least intensified, by the resource-constrained environment it was operating under after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. Slogans such as "building partner capacity" grew even more frequent after the Budget Control Act of 2011, which mandated reductions in both defence and non-defence spending. The 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance, a document released by the Department of Defense following that Act, stated plainly that: "building partnership capacity elsewhere in the world remains important for sharing the costs and responsibilities of global leadership".[23] The Third Country Training Program (TCTP) between the United States and Singapore, launched in February 2012, is often cited as a good operational example of burden sharing as both countries were able to combine their resources to extend technical assistance to other ASEAN countries.[24]

Beyond the burden-sharing imperative, leading US policymakers also saw strategic partnerships as a way to institutionalize and structure relationships with important countries in the Asia Pacific which were not already American allies. For example, in public remarks delivered to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. in 2012, then Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell noted that a major reason for pursuing strategic partnerships in Asia was to put in place more structured mechanisms to address the lack of institutionalization of US relationships in Asia relative to those in Europe.[25] This, Campbell argued, would create a "tempo" in the relationship, thereby both disciplining existing bureaucracies

to take stock of cooperation on a regularized basis and ensuring that this momentum would be sustained beyond the current administration, which could otherwise be potentially less committed to them.[26]

For US policymakers, the objective of institutionalizing and structuring relationships in the Asia Pacific specifically was to eventually create a more extensive network of partners in the region beyond traditional allies as part of a rebalancing strategy.[27] As Secretary Clinton put it in her *Foreign Policy* article — which was the first public unveiling of the Obama administration's "pivot" (subsequently termed rebalance) to the Asia Pacific — "our challenge now is to build a web of partnerships and institutions across the Pacific that is as durable and as consistent with American interests and values as the web we have built across the Atlantic. That is the touchstone of our efforts in all these areas."[28] This "web", in the mind of US policymakers, would consist of several elements including: Washington's traditional "hub-and-spoke" network of bilateral alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand and the Philippines; existing minilateral and multilateral institutions like ASEAN and other regional fora like the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF); and newer partners like Vietnam and Malaysia which did not previously have robust, institutionalized relationships with the United States for a variety of reasons including history and more contemporary strategic realities. This web also envisioned more formal and informal networks *between* its allies and partners, with examples ranging from more formal ones such as the US-Japan-India trilateral as well as more informal ones like the triangular cooperation initiated in US-Indonesia joint cooperation on assistance to Myanmar.[29]

Hence, it is clear that US policymakers fervently pursued strategic partnerships in the Asia Pacific to enlist target countries that could help address shared challenges and to institutionalize and structure their own relationships in the region. Now that the article has explained the reasons behind Washington's pursuit of strategic partnerships in the first place, it will move to outline a framework for detailing how US policymakers conceive, develop and assess individual strategic partnerships with specific countries over time. Such a framework is not only important for comprehending how these policymakers use strategic partnerships as a tool of statecraft, but could serve as a useful guidepost for understanding future partnerships as well.

A Framework for Understanding US Strategic Partnerships in the Asia-Pacific Region

As strategic partnerships have proliferated between countries, there have been several attempts to understand how they conceptualize these alignments.[30] Since this form of alignment is relatively new in the United States, such analyses have yet to be undertaken. To fill this gap, this section constructs a preliminary three-part Rationale Development Evaluation (RDE) framework to understand how US policymakers conceive, craft and evaluate strategic partnerships in the Asia Pacific, with a view to then apply it to US partnerships with Indonesia and Vietnam in the following section.[31]

Such a framework is important for several reasons. As Thomas Wilkins has argued, developing frameworks for understanding strategic partnerships helps reveal the intricacies of how individual countries pursue these alignments as well as their role and functions as tools of statecraft more generally in a systematic way[32]. As will be illustrated in the pages that follow, the RDE framework provides the first detailed account of the "life cycle' of US strategic partnerships, detailing how US policymakers select target countries, how they develop the various elements of a partnership and piece them together, and the mechanisms they use to evaluate them. Furthermore, frameworks such as this can also help serve as tools to understand future strategic partnerships that Washington may pursue with other countries as well.

Before proceeding, a few caveats are in order. First, the goal of this framework is not to capture the idiosyncrasies of every single US strategic partnership, but to generalize about a range of them in the Asia Pacific. Second, while the framework is divided into three parts, this is largely meant to facilitate explanation of how US policymakers conceive, develop and assess strategic partnerships. In actual fact, US policymakers may of course be confronting two phases at once or a certain partnership may evolve differently because of specific circumstances. Third, this section and the article more generally focuses on a *US perspective* of strategic partnerships. Hence, while it fully recognizes that other countries such as Vietnam, India and Indonesia have their own conceptions of strategic partnerships, they are not the overwhelming focus here.

Rationales

Before developing new strategic partnerships, US policymakers must figure out which "target countries" to pursue. Logically, they will tend to focus on the countries that are most critical for the realization of US interests. They will make this determination largely by analysing the confluence of three factors: the pre-existing record of bilateral cooperation; the target country's role in the regional and global landscape; and its alignment with the current administration's wider foreign policy objectives.

The first factor US policymakers examine when considering which countries to prioritize in foreign policy is the pre-existing record of bilateral cooperation between the United States and the target country. US strategic partnerships are typically formed with countries which were previously non-aligned or had a checkered, even estranged relationship with the United States but are now already witnessing an uptick in cooperation with Washington. For instance, Malaysia's relationship with the United States has improved dramatically over the past few years under Prime Minister Najib Razak, with tangible increases in economic and security cooperation as well as the absence of nationalist invectives heard in the 1980s and 1990s during the tenure of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.[33] By the end of 2010, former US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell was describing US-Malaysia relations as the most improved in Southeast Asia, and Kuala Lumpur became a logical target country for a comprehensive partnership.[34]

The second factor is how a country fits in with trends in the region and the wider world. The case for emphasizing greater alignment with a country may be strengthened by certain regional and global trends which can either pull the United States and the target country closer due to similar positions on key contemporary challenges, or, alternatively, make clear that the country's geopolitical heft itself makes greater engagement a priority. In the case of India, both were evident from early 2000s. India, the world's second most populous country, fourth largest economy and largest democracy, was increasingly seen by US policymakers as an important country to engage *vis-à-vis* China's rise and the growing importance of Afghanistan and Pakistan following the 9/11 attacks.[35]

The final factor is the target country's alignment with the current US administration's wider foreign policy objectives. For instance, while the momentum for closer US-New Zealand ties was

rising from the mid-2000s, the Obama administration's rebalance strategy to the Asia Pacific provided an additional impetus to enhance ties with that country as Washington would be better able to draw on Wellington's deep connections with the Pacific Islands region.[36] In Secretary Clinton's *Foreign Policy* article, she specifically cites New Zealand as an example of an emerging country which the United States is hoping to work with "to help solve shared problems".[37]

After Washington decides on a target country and elects to pursue a strategic partnership with it, both countries will discuss how to develop this partnership. They may decide to discuss it in private and only unveil it publicly once the nuances are worked out, or one side may broach the idea publicly first which will then spur an effort to actually develop the partnership itself. Following that initial discussion, the United States and the target country will move into the development phase of the framework.

Development

Once there is an interest in pursuing a strategic partnership, the United States and the target country will begin the work required to actually develop it. There are three main components of a strategic partnership that the two countries will focus on and will ultimately be used to structure the overall framework: the principles or ideals that underpin the overall relationship; the areas of cooperation to prioritize; and the dialogue mechanisms and agencies to advance that cooperation. While the mechanics of a US strategic partnership are usually designed by bureaucrats on both sides, its negotiation involves the engagement of non-governmental actors and publics, particularly on the American side. The structure of the strategic partnership and its component parts are usually ultimately detailed either in one initial joint statement issued at the outset or several of them over time.

The first component is the principles and ideals that underpin the relationship. This component, which Wilkins calls the "system principle", establishes the overall basis for enhanced cooperation beyond just individual areas of cooperation.[38] When both sides work on this component, the sources of these principles and ideals could include references to pre-existing cooperation, key documents from regional or multilateral institutions, or more general principles in international relations such as respect for territorial integrity. In the Wellington Declaration which marked the official establishment

of the US-New Zealand strategic partnership, the language stressed regional peace, prosperity and stability, free trade, and freedom, democracy and human rights[39].

Beyond this "system principle", the strategic partnership will also include two other key components — the specific areas of cooperation as well as the various dialogues, mechanisms and agencies involved. With respect to the areas of cooperation, since strategic partnerships provide an overarching framework for collaboration, some of these areas may already be emphasized by the two sides and folded in, while others may be newly conceived. These areas — which US officials sometimes refer to as "pillars" of cooperation — vary by country but usually encompass the following realms which reflect the comprehensive nature of the strategic partnership: politics, economics, security and people-to-people ties.

In working out the mechanisms and dialogues within each of these priority areas, US policymakers are cognizant that while the temptation might be to fashion a truly "all of government approach" involving as many relevant agencies as possible, this needs to be balanced with the consideration that including too many actors initially could also make the relationship unwieldy and unfocused. As one former senior Obama administration official recounted, with the renewed focus on the Asia Pacific over the past few years in US government circles, the challenge in fashioning these strategic partnerships is now as much about "streamlining" existing cooperation among a multitude of agencies as it is about "growing the breadth" of the relationship.[40]

Aside from deciding which agencies to involve and what mechanisms to use, US policymakers also need to consider how best to structure all these components within the partnership. One option would be to design an overall strategic dialogue (called SD for short by US officials) chaired by senior officials by both sides on a regular basis to act as an umbrella for all areas of cooperation, dialogues and mechanisms. This was what occurred when the United States and Singapore established an annual Strategic Partnership Dialogue in 2012.[41] The advantage of this is that it provides both sides with an "overarching superstructure to give some guidance to all these dialogues" as one US official put it.[42] On the other hand, an SD will require the regular attendance of senior US officials to be sustained, and continued absence or delays may cause frustration for the target country and undermine rather that further cooperation.

As US bureaucrats develop the mechanics of the strategic partnership with their counterparts, there will also be an engagement of non-governmental actors and publics. Whether these actors are supportive of the partnership or opposed to it, they can exert significant influence in its content, timing and overall direction. In the US-Malaysia relationship, for example, the Malaysia-America Foundation, a non-profit, bi-national non-governmental organization (NGO) chartered in Washington, D.C. and founded in October 2013, has been working to help boost further ties and was mentioned in the joint statement following the signing of the comprehensive partnership in April 2014.[43] Diaspora communities can also help or hinder the development of a strategic partnership. For instance, the rising influence of the Indian-American community through various lobbying groups played an important supporting role in certain aspects of the US-India strategic partnership, most notably the civilian nuclear deal under the Bush administration[44]. By contrast, as will be detailed later, a substantial segment of the politically active Vietnamese-American community in the United States has defined itself in opposition to the Vietnamese government, having first arrived largely as exiles or refugees following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975.[45] This has made efforts to advance a US-Vietnam comprehensive partnership more difficult.

Once both sides have general agreement over the overall structure of the strategic partnership, it is usually detailed in either a single initial joint statement at the outset or several over time. At the same time, former US diplomats are quick to stress that the development of US strategic partnerships is an evolving process.[46] Therefore, in future rounds of consultations after the original partnership is announced, areas of cooperation may be broadened, new mechanisms or dialogues can be created, and more creative ways to structure the relationship may be introduced.

Evaluation

As a strategic partnership develops, US policymakers and their counterparts begin to use various means to evaluate it. There are three different kinds of evaluation that can be discerned: periodic-based evaluation; event-based evaluation; and strategic evaluation.

Periodic-based evaluation is an automated review of a strategic partnership on a regular basis, often directly through mechanisms already built into the relationship. In the case of the strategic

partnership between the United States and India, which is both older and more structured, the annual strategic dialogue is chaired at the highest diplomatic level involving the U.S. Secretary of State and the Indian External Affairs Minister. For some newer partnerships, periodic-based evaluation may not initially take place strictly on an annual basis and it may not necessarily always occur at the highest diplomatic level. The US-Singapore Strategic Partners Dialogue occurs on a regular basis determined by both sides and is chaired by the US Assistant Secretary of State and Singapore's Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. And while the United States and Indonesia agreed to hold annual joint commission meetings which have been co-chaired by the US Secretary of State and the Indonesian foreign minister, as we will see later, both sides have faced challenges ensuring that these meetings occur on a regular basis.

Periodic-based evaluations are important because their institutionalized nature serves to mobilize US policy bureaucracies to take stock of previous cooperation and contemplate future opportunities — or "deliverables" as US policymakers often call them — ahead of high-level meetings.[47] More generally, policymakers from both sides acknowledge that the regular pattern of interactions creates a familiarization among both sides and helps build trust.[48]

Event-based evaluation is a review of a strategic partnership that is triggered by a specific occurrence or interaction not previously built into the partnership itself. This is usually a visit by a high-ranking US official to promote ties in the wake of general concerns or a more immediate crisis. Since the American foreign policy bureaucracy tends to function quite reactively and various countries tend to compete for the finite attention of high-ranking officials, these interactions — which policymakers often term "action-forcing events" — may catalyse a broader discussion about the strategic partnership and what actions to take to further it. For example, President Barack Obama's visit to Malaysia in April 2014 was an action-forcing event that catalysed various bureaucracies in Washington to think about how both sides might advance the relationship. Separately, Teresita and Howard Schaeffer, both former US ambassadors, have noted that in the US-India strategic partnership, "action-forcing events" such as high-level meetings and meetings have served to "force decisions on stalled issues and focus leaders' attention on a relationship that is important but not in crisis".[49]

The third and final kind of evaluation is strategic evaluation. This kind of evaluation, which can be undertaken either by the US government or, more often, non-governmental or ex-government actors who can afford to be more candid, will focus on assessing the overall strategic partnership to identify lessons for the future, and perhaps even assess the utility of strategic partnerships more generally either from a comparative or theoretical perspective. In terms of US strategic partnerships, this kind of evaluation is still in its initial stages because of the relatively recent emergence of this alignment, and the emphasis tends to be a lot more on individual relationships rather than strategic partnerships more generally.[50]

Applying the Framework: The Indonesia and Vietnam Comprehensive Partnerships

Now that the RDE framework has been outlined, this section applies it to the Indonesia and Vietnam comprehensive partnerships. These two cases were selected for several reasons. Of the six partnerships the United States currently has in the Asia Pacific — with India, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and Vietnam — Indonesia and Vietnam are two of the four newer ones established under the Obama administration (the other two being Malaysia and New Zealand) as opposed to the strategic partnerships with India and Singapore whose foundations were laid during previous administrations. Since this article is focused on the Obama administration's thinking behind these partnerships, looking at examples promulgated under its tenure makes sense. Among the four newer partnerships, the one with Malaysia was signed in April 2014, making it too early for a meaningful evaluation relative to the others which were signed between 2010 and 2013. Meanwhile, New Zealand in effect represents a unique case considering that Washington and Wellington previously had an alliance under the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS) military alliance which ruptured in 1984 because of Wellington's non-nuclear policy. The Indonesia and Vietnam cases also display sufficient variation in terms of how they arose, how they were negotiated and the way in which various mechanisms are used to evaluate them.

The section begins with US-Indonesia comprehensive partnership, which was officially declared in November 2010, and uses this more mature partnership as a basis for comparison with the newer US-Vietnam comprehensive partnership which was signed in July 2013.

Indonesia

Rationales

After a testy period in the 1990s due to human rights concerns and the 1997–98 Asian Financial Crisis, Indonesia's cooperation with the United States was on the uptick beginning in the early 2000s.[51] During former Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri's visit to the White House a week after the 9/11 attacks, she and President George W. Bush vowed to "open a new era of bilateral cooperation".[52] Subsequently, human rights would take a backseat to ensure Indonesia would be an effective partner in the so-called "war on terror", and after the 2002 Bali bombings and the 2004 tsunami, Washington and Jakarta fully resumed military-to-military ties in 2005.[53] Relations also improved in non-military dimensions as well, with American assistance to promote education and development.[54] While opposition to the United States was still fierce among some of the wider public, this pre-existing cooperation nonetheless provided a good foundation for the incoming Obama administration to build on for a strategic partnership.[55]

This foundation of cooperation was combined with regional and global conditions that made Indonesia's importance as a partner clearer still. Indonesia's role in the G-20 and its leadership within ASEAN, which Secretary Clinton called "the fulcrum" for Asia's emerging regional architecture, reinforced the extent of Jakarta's geopolitical heft.[56] While violent extremism and terrorism in the Muslim world was a growing concern after 9/11, Indonesia, for all its flaws, appealed to those looking for a model country where democracy and Islam can work hand in hand.

A stronger partnership with Indonesia was also aligned with the priorities of the incoming Obama administration. Secretary Clinton directly mentioned Indonesia during her speech to the Council on Foreign Relations in July 2009 on building a "multi-partner world" to solve global problems, and Jakarta was also a critical part of the Obama administration's rebalancing strategy which also sought to focus greater attention on Southeast Asia.[57] President Obama too had a personal connection to Indonesia, having lived there as a child from 1968 to 1971.

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono first broached the prospect of a strategic partnership during a speech at a United States–Indonesia Society (USINDO) luncheon in Washington, D.C. in November 2008.[58] Secretary Clinton, during her visit to Indonesia in February 2009 as part of her maiden trip as secretary of state,

reciprocated by saying that Washington wanted to open a "robust partnership" with Indonesia.[59] Eventually, the Indonesian Foreign Ministry conveyed to its US counterpart that the term comprehensive partnership would be more in line with the relationship that they sought, and both sides agreed to move forward on developing such a partnership.[60]

Development

Official work on the comprehensive partnership began in mid-2009 and accelerated following President Yudhoyono's inauguration and the appointment of his foreign minister Marty Natalegawa in October 2009. However, the work on the partnership greatly outpaced the official declaration of it, since President Obama's trip to Indonesia — which was originally scheduled for March 2010 — was repeatedly postponed until he finally visited Jakarta in November that year.

The ideals and principles underpinning the comprehensive partnership were stipulated in a joint declaration by the two sides released on 9 November after President Obama's meeting with President Yudhoyono. That declaration noted that "the partnership is founded on the shared values of freedom, pluralism, tolerance, democracy and respect for human rights".[61]

With respect to areas of cooperation, both sides conceived of a Plan of Action to implement the comprehensive partnership. That Plan of Action focused on 54 areas of cooperation under three categories: political and security cooperation; economic and development cooperation; and sociocultural, educational, science and technology and other cooperation.

In terms of mechanisms to structure that cooperation, the two parties also agreed that this Plan of Action would be implemented by a joint commission chaired at the highest diplomatic levels (initially by Secretary Clinton and Foreign Minister Natalegawa), and that the commission, which would meet annually, would comprise six working groups with relevant agencies and bodies to further structure cooperation: Democracy and Civil Society; Education; Climate and Environment; Trade and Investment; Security; and Energy. Three of those working groups had essentially already existed, while the other three were new. The first joint commission meeting was held in Washington, D.C. on 17 September 2010, after which the Plan of Action was disclosed.[62]

US policymakers also stressed that they made an attempt to engage non-governmental actors as well in order to extend relations

beyond the government-to-government level.[63] This was important because public perceptions of the United States under the Bush administration continued to be negative in spite of improvements in the relationship at the elite level, thereby constraining how Indonesia's leaders could act.[64] As the comprehensive partnership was declared in November 2010 in Indonesia, for example, the White House announced the "IKAT-US Partnership", an initiative to help Indonesian civil society groups to share their expertise and experiences outside of Indonesia.[65]

Evaluation

Following the development of the comprehensive partnership and its official birth in November 2010, both parties used all three kinds of evaluation to assess its progress.

The best opportunity for period-based evaluation for Washington and Jakarta is the annual joint commission meeting chaired at the highest diplomatic levels, and both sides have used it effectively in that regard.[66] Each joint commission meeting has produced a statement outlining the new initiatives that have been undertaken since the previous meeting and grouped under previously conceived categories. For example, the last joint commission meeting held in February 2014 had 44 action items separated under the three categories.

Yet this form of evaluation has also presented challenges for both sides. While joint commission meetings were initially held annually under Secretary Clinton, nearly a year and a half elapsed before her successor, John Kerry, was able to visit Indonesia in February 2014 for the fourth meeting. That fed into the narrative in Indonesia and the region more broadly that Kerry was less focused on Asia than his predecessor, which could potentially slow the momentum of such comprehensive partnerships.[67] Some former administration officials noted that too much emphasis was being placed at these meetings on deliverables at the expense of a greater focus on increasing familiarity between counterparts.[68] Others have noted that the pressure for new deliverables and metrics can be challenging in a fiscally-constrained environment.[69]

The two parties also used event-based evaluation to take stock of the comprehensive partnership. For instance, when President Obama visited Indonesia in November 2011 to attend the EAS, he also met President Yudhoyono in Bali. That "action-forcing event" provided an opportunity for the two sides to not only evaluate

progress but also announce new initiatives such as a five-year, $600 million Millennium Challenge Compact for Indonesia.[70] But while events have helped mobilize bureaucracies on both sides, at times the opportunity for boosting momentum has been lost when the events themselves did not occur. A recent example of this was when President Obama's visit to Indonesia to attend the APEC meeting in Bali in October 2013 was canceled in the wake of the government shutdown.

Though the US-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership is only over three years old, there have already been a few recent attempts to strategically evaluate it. One notable example is a CSIS report entitled "A US-Indonesia Partnership for 2020", written with the involvement of former US deputy chief of mission to Indonesia (and current nominee for US ambassador to Vietnam) Ted Osius. The report outlines several recommendations along the lines of the three pillars in the Plan of Action, including an institutionalized non-governmental review mechanism for the relationship and expanding ties between the two legislatures.[71] Osius has also written a separate comparative piece looking at how the United States can deepen partnerships with both Indonesia and India, in which he recommends that Washington and Jakarta should expand their comprehensive partnership to include greater collaboration in areas like maritime domain awareness, aviation and infrastructure development.[72]

Vietnam

Rationales

While US-Vietnam relations were essentially frozen from the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 to the mid-1990s, since then ties have expanded fairly quickly. Under the Bush administration, the two sides not only fully normalized economic ties, but began a closer security relationship due to increasingly convergent concerns about China's rise.[73] Although human rights concerns persisted among Vietnamese-Americans and certain government circles, the record of pre-existing cooperation, as in the case of Indonesia, was nonetheless a foundation for the Obama administration to build on to construct a strategic partnership.

Regional and global events also served to further emphasize Vietnam's growing importance to American interests. With China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, Vietnam's status as a claimant made it a logical partner in any US attempt to help

regional states push back against Beijing. Vietnam's successful chairmanship of ASEAN in 2010 also attested to its importance within Southeast Asia.

Vietnam was also aligned with several of the Obama administration's policy priorities, though from a much more regional rather than a global perspective as was the case with Indonesia. For example, Hanoi was a partner in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), which were both considered important administration initiatives.

The first public articulation of a partnership came from the United States. During Secretary Clinton's 2010 visit to Hanoi, she declared that all the fundamentals were in place for the United States to take its relations with Vietnam "to the next level of engagement, cooperation, friendship and partnership".[74] The stage was thus set for both sides to officially begin work on a partnership of some sort. The Vietnamese Foreign Ministry eventually conveyed to its counterparts that the term "comprehensive partnership" would be more in line with the US-Vietnam relationship.[75]

Development

While Secretary Clinton had declared that all the fundamentals were in place for the construction of a strategic partnership, the path to getting there would be a much more difficult one for both sides relative to the Indonesia case.

The principles and ideals underpinning the relationship, as outlined in the joint statement adopted by the two presidents in July 2013, focused principally on international documents like the United Nations Charter as well as general principles like territorial integrity and global peace.[76] The sort of solidarity Washington expressed with Jakarta on freedom, pluralism, tolerance and democracy was absent because of obvious differences between the two sides on these issues.

On areas of cooperation, the two countries agreed to focus primarily on nine areas: political and diplomatic cooperation; trade and economic ties; science and technology cooperation; education cooperation; environment and health; war legacy issues; defence and security; the promotion and protection of human rights; and culture, tourism and sports.[77] While some of these areas were similar to those found in other strategic partnerships, two of them were unique to the relationship: human rights and war legacy issues.

In terms of mechanisms, unlike the case of Indonesia, the US-Vietnam comprehensive partnership is not as institutionalized and has neither an overarching joint commission nor an overall Plan of Action. While the joint statement mentioned that both leaders "welcomed the establishment of a regular dialogue between their two foreign ministries", according to US sources at the time of this writing, this dialogue is still ad-hoc and has yet to be regularized.[78] Thus, the areas of cooperation would have to be advanced principally through the various existing dialogues such as the Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue (PSDD), the Defense Policy Dialogue or the Human Rights Dialogue.

While engaging other actors beyond foreign policy bureaucrats is a necessary part of any US comprehensive partnership, it slowed progress on the partnership on both sides. In the United States, a number of actors, most prominently a sizable and vocal Vietnamese-American community and some Congressional representatives, opposed strengthening the US-Vietnam relationship without improving the human rights situation in Vietnam. They held up the confirmation of US ambassador to Vietnam David Shear in 2011 and repeatedly introduced legislation during pivotal moments of the relationship, including during President Truong Tan Sang's 2013 visit.[79] Meanwhile, in Vietnam, a segment of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) continued to be suspicious of US efforts to undermine regime security through "peaceful evolution" under the pretext of democracy and human rights even if the strategic partnership was in Hanoi's national interest.[80] That made it difficult to advance the relationship in more sensitive areas.

Evaluation

Since there is not yet an overarching joint commission or a regularized meeting between foreign ministers, periodic-based evaluation in the US-Vietnam comprehensive partnership is still conducted principally via the various dialogues such as the PSDD or the Defense Policy Dialogue (DPD). For instance, during the fourth DPD in October 2013, the two countries took stock of cooperation and also concluded a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between their coast guards.[81] While there may be a joint-commission-like feature added to the partnership sometime in the future, a key consideration will be whether Vietnam can successfully compete with other countries for the attention of principal deputy assistant secretaries and other more senior officials.

The lack of a regular high-level dialogue makes event-based evaluation even more important. Thus far, it appears that both sides are successfully utilizing this kind of evaluation to fold in additional cooperative endeavours into the framework of the comprehensive partnership. For example, during Secretary Kerry's visit to Vietnam on 14–16 December 2013, around five months after the comprehensive partnership was declared, both sides were able to announce four "deliverables" in the areas of maritime capacity building, economic engagement, climate change and environmental issues.[82]

As the US-Vietnam comprehensive partnership is less than a year old, there has not been much in the way of a broad strategic evaluation of the overall relationship as yet. However, some scholars have attempted to clarify exactly what the partnership means for both sides, paying particular attention to its limits relative to other partnerships of its kind.[83]

Conclusion

Thus far, the Obama administration has deployed strategic partnerships as a tool within its broader rebalancing strategy in the Asia Pacific to institutionalize its relationships in the region and to promote burden sharing with target countries. Even though some of these partnerships are only a few years old, their evolution thus far has nonetheless highlighted the benefits of these arrangements as well as the challenges that they raise.

The future direction of such partnerships as an element of American strategy in the Asia-Pacific region is unclear. On the one hand, these partnerships could be expanded to include other countries as well. US Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel appeared to hint at this prospect when he pointed out in a May 2014 speech that a similar arrangement could "hopefully someday" be pursued with Myanmar.[84] As US policymakers consider replicating these partnerships with other nations, they, along with other actors, could then begin to develop more systematic ways to measure the progress of these arrangements to sieve out lessons learned.

On the other hand, a sustained lack of high-level attention devoted to these partnerships during the remainder of the second Obama administration could retard their development. Despite the often-cited consensus and bipartisanship that exists in US–Asia policy, Obama's successor and his team may not have the same enthusiasm for all these emerging partnerships when they enter office in 2017. They may prefer to lavish relatively more attention

on tighter US alliances, or perhaps focus on certain partnerships as opposed to others. The domestic politics within these countries and their relationships with other powers including China could also constrain both parties' ability or willingness to elevate ties, particularly since countries like Vietnam and Indonesia have signed such partnerships with many other major nations as well aside from the United States.

Regardless of their future trajectory, the growing use of looser alignments like strategic partnerships by the world's only superpower and its leading alliance builder in the twentieth century itself deserves attention. US policymakers are increasingly appreciating the importance of such arrangements as part of a strategy for navigating a more complex, interdependent Asia. This promises to have significant implications not only for the partners that Washington courts, but the other components of its Asia strategy as well including US-China relations, multilateral institutions and traditional US alliances.

NOTES

1 For some recent examples, see William Tow and Rikki Kersten, *Bilateral Perspectives on Regional Security: Australia, Japan, and the Asia-Pacific Region* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Thomas S. Wilkins, "Alignment, Not Alliance: The Shifting Paradigm of International Security Cooperation", *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 1 (January 2012): 53–76; and, John Ciorciari, *The Limits of Alignment: Southeast Asia and the Great Powers since 1975* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010).

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3 The strategic partnership between China and Russia in 1996 is regarded as the first major example of this, and it was followed by others such as the one between Russia and India in 2000. Since then, strategic partnerships have been employed much more widely by a range of actors in the Asia Pacific. For instance, by one count, India has more than 20 strategic partnerships and China has close to 50, while Indonesia and Vietnam have each inked more than a dozen such agreements. See Feng Zhongping and Huang Jing, "China's

Strategic Partnership Diplomacy: Engaging with a Changing World", European Strategic Partnerships Observatory Working Paper No. 8, June 2014.

4 A number of shorter commentaries and articles have either attempted to evaluate or explain the origins of particular US partnerships. For a perspective on whether the US-India strategic partnership was oversold, see Dan Twining, "Was the U.S.-India Relationship Oversold?", *Foreign Policy*, 26 April 2012, available at <http://www.gmfus.org/archives/was-the-u-s-india-relationship-oversold-2/>. For a discussion of some of the issues behind the negotiation of the US-Vietnam comprehensive partnership, see Carlyle Thayer, "The US-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership: What's In A Name?", Australian Strategic Policy Institute, July 2013, available at <http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-us-vietnam-comprehensive-partnership-whats-in-a-name/>.

5 While the Bush administration also sought strategic partnerships, most notably with India, the arrangement has been used much more widely in the Obama administration.

6 Thomas Wilkins, "Alignment, Not Alliance", op. cit., p. 67.

7 According to one recent account by Vietnam's Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh, while strategic partnerships emphasize high-level cooperation in all areas, comprehensive partnerships are at a level lower than strategic partnerships because while some areas may reach a high level of cooperation, "the connectivity and attention to each other's strategic interests in other areas are not high". See Pham Binh Minh, "Building Strategic, Comprehensive Partnerships: Vietnam's Soft Power", *Communist Review* 11, no. 4 (May 2014), available at <http://english.tapchicongsan.org.vn/Home/Theory-and-Reality/2014/410/Building-strategic-comprehensive-partnerships-Viet-Nams-soft-power.aspx>.

8 John Ciorciari, *The Limits of Alignment*, op. cit., p. 9.

9 As seen in Jeanne L. Wilson, *Strategic Partners*, op. cit., p. 164.

10 Vidya Nadkarni, *Strategic Partnerships in Asia*, op. cit., pp. 48–49.

11 Indian Ministry of External Affairs, "India-US Relations", December 2013, available at <http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/US_December_2013.pdf>.

12 See for instance Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979), p. 128; and Stephen Walt, *The Origin of Alliances* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 110–13.

13 George Liska, *Nations in Alliance: The Limits of Interdependence* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins Press, 1962).

14 Thomas Wilkins, "Alignment, Not Alliance", p. 68.

15 All three countries began with strategic partnerships with China and then upgraded them to comprehensive strategic partnerships. Vietnam and China became comprehensive strategic partners in 2009, while Malaysia and Indonesia both inked similar agreements with China in October 2013.

16 For example, Kegley and Raymond define an alliance as agreements between sovereign states to coordinate behaviour "in the event of specified contingencies of a *military nature*", while Stephen Walt defines them as "a formal or informal arrangement for *security cooperation*". See, respectively, Charles W. Kegley and Gregory A. Raymond, *When Trust Breaks Down: Alliance Norms and World*

Politics (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1990); and, Stephen Walt, *The Origin of Alliances*, op. cit., p. 12.

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18 Pham Binh Minh, "Building Strategic, Comprehensive Partnerships: Vietnam's Soft Power", *Communist Review* 11, no. 4 (May 2014), available at <http://english.tapchicongsan.org.vn/Home/Theory-and-Reality/2014/410/Building-strategic-comprehensive-partnerships-Viet-Nams-soft-power.aspx>.

19 Thayer, "The US-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership", op. cit.

20 The first prominent work on the subject is Mancur Olson, Jr. and Richard Zeckhauser, *An Economic Theory of Alliances* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 1966).

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22 Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review*, February 2010, available at <http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0314_sdr/qdr/docs/QDR_as_of_12Feb10_1000.pdf>.

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27 Conversation with former Obama administration official, 4 June 2014.

28 Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century", *Foreign Policy*, 11 October 2011.

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30 For India, see Sarita Azad, Shashank Mathur and Arvind Gupta, "Evaluating India's Strategic Partnerships Using Analytic Hierarchy Process", *Advanced Science Focus* 1, no. 1 (March 2013): 96–101; and Satish Kumar, S.D. Pradhan, Kanwal Sibal, Rahul Bedi and Bidisha Ganguly, "India's Strategic Partners: A Comparative Assessment" (New Delhi: Foundation for National Security Research, November 2011), available at <http://fnsr.org/files/Indias_Strategic.pdf>. For Vietnam, see Pham Binh Minh, "Building Strategic, Comprehensive Partnerships: Vietnam's Soft Power", op. cit.

31 This framework approach is inspired by an earlier effort by Wilkins. See Wilkins, "Japan's Alliance Diversification", op. cit., pp. 122–27. Wilkins uses a three-part analytical framework that tracks the association between strategic partners across a "collaboration continuum" in three phases: formation, implementation and evaluation. The RDE framework also has three phases as it details how US policymakers conceive, develop and evaluate strategic partnerships. However, the specifics of the framework are different as Wilkins' draws heavily on Organizational Theories, which I do not. Several elements of Wilkins' framework also appears to be governed by an understanding of strategic partnerships by several Asian countries, most notably Japan, while the RDE framework captures the idiosyncrasies of US thinking about them.

32 Ibid., p. 122.

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38 Thomas Wilkins, "Japan's Alliance Diversification", op. cit.

39 U.S. Department of State, "Wellington Declaration on a New Strategic Partnership Between New Zealand and the United States", 4 November 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2010/11/150401.htm>.

40 Conversation with former Obama administration official, Washington, D.C., 12 May 2014.

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[51] For a more extensive history of US-Indonesia relations, see Paul F. Gardner, *Shared Hopes, Separate Fears: Fifty Years of US-Indonesian Relations* (Pittsburg, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

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[56] Hillary Clinton, "America's Engagement in the Asia-Pacific", Honolulu, Hawaii, 28 October 2010, available at <http://m.state.gov/md150141.htm>.

[57] Hillary Clinton, "Council on Foreign Relations Address", op. cit. The increased focus on Southeast Asia is arguably the most important part of the rebalance. For a longer exposition of this point see Satu P. Limaye, "Southeast Asia in America's Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific", *Southeast Asian Affairs 2013*, edited by Daljit Singh (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013), pp. 40–50.

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[62] Department of State, "U.S.-Indonesia Joint Commission and Bilateral Meeting", 17 September 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2010/09/147309.htm>.

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79 See Viet Tan, "Congressional Letter Urging New US Ambassador to Give Priority to Human Rights", 21 September 2011; and, House Foreign Affairs Committee, "Chairman Royce Urges President Obama to Make Human Rights Top Priority During Visit of Vietnamese President", 22 July 2013.

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