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Putin's Visit to Hanoi: Hardly a Challenge to Vietnam-US Strategic Partnership

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Russian president Vladimir Putin's visit to Hanoi earlier this week may have caused some consternation in the United States regarding Vietnam's reliability as a security partner in Asia. Given Hanoi's penchant for strategic hedging, Washington should not overly worry about its Russian tango.



Caption: President Putin and President To Lam at Vietnam's Presidential Palace.

Vietnam's recent hosting of Russian president Vladimir Putin is intriguing as it risked [irking](#) its Western partners, especially the United States. The timing of the visit also

does not bode well for Vietnam-US relations as Vietnam is appealing for the United States to recognise it as a [market economy](#). However, Hanoi's strategic importance outweighs Washington's concerns about close ties between Vietnam and Russia.

The decision to roll out the red carpet for Putin despite growing economic and defence ties with the United States is in line with Vietnam's "[bamboo diplomacy](#)", which emphasises strategic flexibility and balanced relations with all major powers. Seen this way, Hanoi's actions are hardly surprising, for what matters *ultimately is Hanoi's interests*, not those of other countries. The analogy of Hanoi being unwilling to get married (or allied) to any one major power so that it could choose freely among its suitors can be used to describe Vietnam's hedging policy, as recounted by a Vietnamese source to one of the authors.

For instance, Vietnam hosted US president Joe Biden in September last year and upgraded bilateral ties between the two countries to the highest level of comprehensive strategic partnership (CSP), the same level as with Russia and China. But in typical hedging behaviour, Vietnam subsequently welcomed China's president Xi Jinping and joined the China-led "community of shared future". Putin's visit to Vietnam further showcases the Southeast Asian nation's diplomatic dexterity in walking a tightrope between competing powers.

Bamboo Diplomacy at Work

Vietnam's bamboo diplomacy is further exemplified by its [neutral stance](#) on the Russian-Ukraine War. Rather than aligning with the West in condemning Russia, Vietnam has consistently emphasised the importance of adhering to the principles of the UN Charter and international law, particularly the principle of respect for countries' independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. Vietnam has abstained from several UN resolutions against Russia and skipped the recent Ukraine peace summit, most likely to avoid upsetting Moscow.

At the same time, Vietnam has not echoed Russia's narrative in blaming the war on NATO. It has been cautious not to take any steps that might be seen as undermining Western sanctions against Russia. Notably, Hanoi has not acquiesced to Moscow's [request](#) to re-export Soviet/Russian-made military equipment, ammunition and spare parts in Vietnam's arsenal to support its ongoing war with Ukraine. All these demonstrate Hanoi's delicate balancing act as it seeks to maintain long-standing ties with Moscow while prudently sidestepping any actions that could jeopardise its growing relations with the West.

Some observers have raised the [concern](#) that Putin's visit could lead the United States to question Vietnam's reliability as a strategic partner. Although Vietnam is not directly supporting Russia's war efforts like North Korea is, the country's cordial reception of Putin has been perceived by some as a gesture that undermines US-led global initiatives aimed at isolating Russia. In response to Vietnam's decision to host Putin, the US embassy in Hanoi [said](#) that "no country should give Putin a platform to promote his war of aggression and otherwise allow him to normalize his atrocities."

Experts had [anticipated](#) that the visit would focus on sensitive issues such as arms deals and Russian ruble–Vietnamese dong currency transactions to circumvent

Western sanctions. Last year, a leaked document from Vietnam's finance ministry revealed that the country [plans](#) to modernise its military by paying for Russian weapons through the joint Vietnamese-Russian oil venture Rusvietpetro. This alternative funding mechanism would allow Vietnam to make large purchases without using US dollars, which could trigger the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) sanctions.

Although none of the bilateral agreement [documents](#) signed between the two countries on this occasion is explicitly linked to defence or ruble–dong currency transactions, Vietnamese president To Lam acknowledged the existence of other deals that will remain confidential. Vietnam may have decided not to publicly disclose any information about sensitive deals to avoid raising concerns in the West.

America's Response

The United States is certainly not happy with Putin's visit and Vietnam's potential defiance of US sanctions. But American strategists and policymakers understand that it would be imprudent to excessively admonish Hanoi, which they regard as a "[critical swing state](#)" in the Indo-Pacific. Thus, despite the initial criticism by the US embassy, the United States has been relatively muted over the visit. American authorities have also declined to comment on the rumoured secret Vietnam-Russian arms agreement.

Moreover, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink made a visit to Vietnam from 20 to 21 June, in a move to further strengthen the US-Vietnam CSP. The timing of his visit, just one day after Putin's, is hardly a coincidence. At a press conference in Hanoi, Kritenbrink emphasised that US-Vietnam trust is at an "[all-time high](#)", most likely to deflect concerns surrounding the implications of Putin's visit. Responding to a question about Putin's visit, he stated that the United States respects Vietnam and that "Vietnam can decide the best way to protect its sovereignty and promote its interests." This statement countered the earlier criticism from the US embassy, possibly with a view to reassuring Vietnam that bilateral relations will not suffer because of Putin's visit. Kritenbrink also reaffirmed US "support for a strong, independent, resilient, and prosperous Vietnam."

The measured US response to these recent developments suggests that it tolerates Vietnam's close partnerships with Russia in the interest of advancing strategic ties with Vietnam. After all, Vietnam's reluctance to condemn Russia and its abstentions in UN resolutions against Russia did not prevent the United States from seeking an upgrade in bilateral ties in 2023.

Vietnam, for its part, is cognisant of the need to avoid being seen as siding with Russia against the West. At one point, it was said to be "[hesitant](#)" to approve Putin's visit, given that it came right after his North Korea trip. It can be argued that Vietnam "doesn't want to be seen as part of the 'axis' which includes Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea" – states that are seen by the West as being bad actors and posing challenges to the current international order.

Kritenbrink's visit provided Vietnam with an opportunity to signal to the United States that Vietnam will continue to work with the United States on issues of shared strategic interests. Vietnamese foreign minister Bui Thanh Son [told](#) Kritenbrink that Vietnam

always considers the United States an important strategic partner. He also noted Vietnam's willingness to back the United States in bolstering ties with the region to foster peace, stability, cooperation and development both regionally and globally.

Owing to its strategic importance, Vietnam has been able to avoid serious adverse repercussions when enhancing ties with Russia and China at the expense of the United States. The US reaction to Vietnam's hosting of Putin is one such example. As such, Vietnam will continue to balance its relations with the United States, China and Russia, seeking different [gains](#) from each power while insuring against the risk of being over reliant on any one partner or entrapped in a great power confrontation. But as great power rivalry intensifies, such balancing acts will be increasingly difficult.

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