

## VIETNAM: Two takeaways from Biden in Hanoi

Earlier this week, Vietnam signed a “comprehensive strategic partnership” (CSP) with the US during the visit of President Joe Biden. Hanoi has entered into similar agreements only with China, India, Russia and South Korea. Most external coverage put the upgrade in relations in the context of US competition with China and Vietnam’s efforts to build multiple engagements in response to Beijing’s regional maneuvering.

### How Vietnam sees the partnership

However, for the Vietnamese leadership, the upgrading of its ties with the US is more nuanced. Domestic coverage of the strategic partnership were less about regional security, if at all, and mostly about building the trade and technological relationships that would sustain the long-term outlook for Vietnam’s industrial and export capabilities and help it achieve middle-income status by the 2030s. For the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), the signing of the CSP is in effect, a validation of its growth strategy, which is in turn key to maintaining its popular legitimacy.

Thus, the promised US support to deepen the development of a semiconductor ecosystem and its integration with global value chains, improve STEM academic and research cooperation and facilitate the expansion of the domestic digital economy played the best domestically for Vietnamese leaders. Local Vietnamese media highlighted how the cooperation in science and technology was the “new breakthrough” of the agreement. It quoted CPV General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong that the US-Vietnam relationship is about “leaving the past behind, overcoming differences, promoting similarities, and looking toward the future.” Aside from manufacturing capabilities, the domestic expectation is that the agreement will also help build new capabilities or improve existing ones in minerals’ processing (a largely underdeveloped sector) and transportation and logistics, particularly for east Asian trade.

### Keep your friends close, and watch To Lam and Truong Thi Mai

Notably, three days after Biden’s visit, CPV politburo member and public security minister To Lam traveled to Beijing to meet with his Chinese Communist Party (CPC) politburo counterpart, the party secretary of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission, Chen Wenqing, who oversees national security and intelligence. Ostensibly, both officials discussed further cooperation on law enforcement and trans-border crime. However, To Lam is also one of the most trusted senior officials of CPV general secretary Trong. During Biden’s meeting with Vietnam’s senior officials, Lam and Truong Thi Mai, Permanent Member of the Secretariat and Head of the Central Organization Commission, sat closest to Trong — likely reflecting not only their positions in the formal hierarchy but their status within Trong’s conservative faction (and possibly keeping them as potential successors to watch).

Lam had become controversial in 2021 after a video circulated of him dining at the expensive Nusr-Et steakhouse in London, while Vietnam was in lockdown; not only did he survive the episode but has apparently maintained his elevated status. It is likely that Lam’s trip to Beijing contained some reassurance about Vietnam’s perspective on the CSP, coming directly from Trong. It would also reflect Vietnam’s continued recognition of its economic and political ties with China, and that even with the promise of greater integration into western supply chains, balancing its relationships remains its key foreign policy goal.

[Client Portal >>](#)

**Bob Herrera-Lim**  
Managing Director  
+1 (646) 561 3514  
[bob.herreralim@teneo.com](mailto:bob.herreralim@teneo.com)