



Former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry speaks with students working in the field of climate change before a speech on the topic at the Mekong Delta village of Kien Vang, Vietnam. Photo from the U.S. State Department.

Courtesy of the U.S. Secretary of Defense



On December 2, 2021, USIP hosted a public online event on “Learning from U.S.-Vietnam Cooperation on Wartime Remains Recovery: How Vietnamese and Americans are Working Together to Account for Missing Personnel from the Vietnam War.” The event featured governmental and non-government speakers from both countries, including Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency Director Kelly McKeague and Vietnamese Deputy Ambassador Hoang Thanh Nga.

## CURRENT SITUATION

Nearly 50 years since the end of the Vietnam War, and more than a quarter century since the normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations, Vietnam is emerging as a rising power at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region and an increasingly important U.S. partner. Once one of the world’s poorest and most isolated countries, Vietnam is now a middle-income country with a dynamic, young population and a promising future.

Since joining ASEAN in 1997, Vietnam has played a significant role in regional diplomacy and development. Vietnam’s foreign policy aims to act as a “friend and reliable partner of all countries in the international community.” Vietnam has established strategic partnerships with Japan, China, India, Russia and other countries. The United States and Vietnam agreed on a “comprehensive partnership” in 2013 that is strategic in all but name, including cooperation on economic, security, educational, cultural and war legacy issues. Vietnam’s policy of multiple partnerships has remained intact despite maritime security challenges in the East (South China) Sea and disputes over management of the Mekong River.

Politically, Vietnam is a one-party state ruled by the Communist Party. The People’s Army of Vietnam has significant influence in the political system. Freedom of expression, opinion and speech are guaranteed in the constitution but not implemented in practice. Vietnam’s vibrant civil society and social media face increasing restrictions affecting both informal



actors (such as bloggers) and legally registered nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Human rights remain a contentious issue in the U.S.-Vietnam relationship; however, both President Obama and President Trump assured Vietnamese leaders in the past that the United States respects Vietnam's differing political system.

The Vietnamese government won international recognition for its strict handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in its early stages. Although subsequent waves have been harder to control, Vietnam's economy has continued to grow at the highest rate in Southeast Asia. Future challenges for the country include how to continue economic liberalization and societal opening while maintaining stability and a relatively low level of inequality.

## **USIP'S WAR LEGACIES AND RECONCILIATION INITIATIVE**

The U.S. Institute of Peace engages in research and dialogue examining the extraordinary arc of U.S.-Vietnam relations. In August 2021, USIP launched a **multiyear project** to foster public education as well as government-to-government and people-to-people dialogue among Vietnamese and Americans. Addressing war legacies, including Agent Orange, unexploded bombs (UXO) and recovery of wartime remains, is an essential component of the wider work of building a strong bilateral partnership.

USIP's initiative stems from Congress's landmark authorization in 2021 for the U.S. government to assist Vietnam in identifying its war dead, following decades of Vietnamese cooperation to help the United States conduct the fullest possible accounting of U.S. personnel. USIP's project aims to further advance reconciliation, to sustain U.S. support for addressing war legacies and to highlight lessons from the U.S.-Vietnam experience that could apply elsewhere in the world.

**Events and Public Education.** USIP convenes virtual and in-person seminars featuring prominent speakers from the U.S. and Vietnam. Our experts also join events with partners around the United States to increase public awareness of the journey towards reconciliation and the ongoing importance of addressing war legacies.

**Facilitating Dialogue.** USIP convenes governmental and nongovernmental leaders in Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues on war legacies and the U.S.-Vietnam partnership. Dialogues focus on specific issues or topics, such as Agent Orange remediation or veterans' exchange. Additional dialogues are planned for students and young professionals from both countries, including Americans of Vietnamese descent.

**Media and Publications.** USIP supports video, social media, blogs and reports on topics related to war legacies and bilateral cooperation, enabling Americans and Vietnamese to speak in their own voices about their experiences of reconciliation. Publications advance USIP's values of ending conflicts and rethinking U.S. engagement in Asia.