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WEBINAR

A FIRESIDE CONVERSATION WITH US AMBASSADOR TO VIETNAM MARC E. KNAPPER

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INTRODUCTION:

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FIRESIDE CONVERSATION:

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Suzanne Maloney: Good morning to our viewers here in the United States, and good evening to everyone who is joining us from Vietnam and around the world. I'm Suzanne Maloney, vice president and director of foreign policy here at the Brookings Institution. And I want to thank all of you for joining us for today's public webinar, featuring the Honorable Marc Knapper, U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam. Ambassador Knapper and the U.S. Mission in Hanoi are working at the forefront of one of America's most dynamic relationships in the Indo-Pacific.

US-Vietnam bilateral relations have expanded dramatically since achieving diplomatic normalization in 1995, as highlighted by the establishment of a comprehensive partnership in 2013. With Vietnam's booming economy and strategic location on the South China Sea, along with growing regional cooperation in areas such as public health, Biden administration officials have expressed strong interest in continuing this trajectory of strengthening bilateral relationships. We hope that today's discussion will shed some light on the next steps for US-Vietnam relations and the prospects for deepening diplomatic ties. We plan to explore the economic aspects of the relationship, security and defense matters, as well as domestic political trends in Vietnam, and how these may impact the bilateral relationship and Vietnam's foreign policy more broadly.

With us to explore these topics today is Ambassador Knapper, who's joining us from Hanoi. Prior to his current appointment, he most recently served as deputy assistant secretary for Korea and Japan from 2018 to 2021. The Department of State has recognized Ambassador Knapper's excellence in the field by awarding him the Secretary of State's Distinguished Service Award, the nation's highest diplomatic honor. He's also the recipient of the Presidential Meritorious Service Award and the State Department's Linguist of the Year Award. Thank you so much for joining us here today, Ambassador Knapper.

My colleague Jonathan Stromseth will be moderating today's discussion. Jonathan is a senior fellow in the Center for East Asia Policy Studies here at Brookings, and he also holds the Lee Kuan Yew chair in Southeast Asian Studies. He came to Brookings after serving on the State Department's policy planning staff and at the Asia Foundation and his most recent book, "Rivalry and Response: Assessing Great Power Dynamics in Southeast Asia," assesses US-China Competition in Southeast Asia. Before we continue to the discussion, let me remind you that we're live and on the record. If viewers would like to submit questions, please email those questions to events at Brookings dot edu

or post them on Twitter with the hashtag U.S. Vietnam. I'm looking forward to a really fascinating discussion and I'll now hand the microphone over to Jonathan Stromseth.

Jonathan Stromseth: Thank you, Suzanne, for, for getting us started today for this I think very interesting topic that we'll be addressing. And Ambassador Knapper, great to see you again. What some people, what some people might not know is Ambassador Knapper and I actually have known each other quite a while. We were in Vietnam together over several years in the early 2000s, when the, if I remember correctly, you were head of the political section, and I was heading up the Asia Foundation office there. What I remember from that time, Ambassador, is great efforts to create the kind of foundations of a market-based economic system. On the domestic side, you had the enterprise law coming out, a modern labor code on the international side, a bilateral trade agreement with the US WTO accession and so on.

And it's pretty amazing now to see Vietnam today still has serious economic issues to address, but it's now the fastest growing economy in Asia at 8%. And I was just wondering if I could ask you to reflect a little bit between what it was like during our time in the early 2000s in Hanoi and now that you're back as ambassador, what you're seeing now and what are the contrasts and changes?

Marc Knapper: Well, thank you, Jonathan. And it's really great to be here with all of you. Thank you, Suzanne, for that introduction, always enjoy appearing at these events at Brookings, because I know what a quality conversation it's going to be. But yes, 2004 to 2007, I was here so more than 15 years ago, certainly more than 15 kilograms ago, I was much younger and thinner back then, so I look back and I look back on those days with some fondness. But yeah, I mean, look, in 2005, the relationship between the United States and Vietnam was only ten years old. We had just mobilized in 1995 and really, in '05, '06, just very modest bilateral efforts in a few areas.

Of course, we were working closely with the government of Vietnam on what we call the war legacy issues, namely, at that time really focused on the, the accounting for American servicemen and women lost in the war. We were working on issues related to, just beginning working on issues related to unexploded ordnance left over from the war. We had a fairly modest trade relationship. We had just the beginnings of a health cooperation relationship, we were the president at the time, President Bush had named Vietnam the only country in Asia to be a recipient of PEPFAR, the President's Emergency fund for HIV AIDS, which really was a sign of, of a level of interest and

concern about the HIV AIDS situation here in Vietnam at the time. But really, I mean, there wasn't again, we were just it was, the relationship was ten years old, we were still getting to know each other, still trying to figure things out.

But fast forward to today. This year, 2023, we're celebrating the 10th anniversary of what we call our comprehensive partnership. And this has really become a remarkable relationship. We have a two-way trade in the neighborhood of \$120 billion. We are Vietnam's number one export market. They are our eighth largest trading partner. You can imagine that. We have cooperative efforts underway in virtually any area you could think of, whether it's science and technology, education, defense, security, law enforcement, people to people ties, investment. There's a Vietnamese company that is working on a \$4 billion investment in the United States to build electric vehicles and batteries, which is, I mean, for any company to invest that much and have that kind of faith in the American worker was very welcome. And the fact that it's a Vietnamese company is just remarkable, I think no matter what, you know, what you what your view is.

And so really this is a relationship that continues to go from strength to strength. And I think it's because we, you know, our interests are fairly well aligned. We share an interest in maintaining the rules based international order. We share an interest in ensuring that the South China Sea remains free and open and able, ships and other commerce to move through unimpeded, the countries in the region aren't coerced and are able to make decisions based on their own interests and not that of outside interests and on and on and on. It really, it's, it's I think we in the last 15 years, especially the last ten years, we've really found our way together with Vietnam. And it's, it's, I think, a relationship that's on nothing but an upward trajectory right now. And it's very exciting to be here and to be working on this, this great friendship and partnership.

Jonathan Stromseth: Yeah. Thank you for, for sort of tracing that enormous project. I think when you're involved in it on a day-to-day basis or tracking it as long as we have, it does seem slow and hard, but when you look back, it's really amazing how far the relationship has, has come. It's, it's, I'd say, quite dramatic. I think what is interesting now and often in the news is, are we on the precipice of, you know, taking it to another level? And I know that you've welcomed some very senior visitors to Hanoi, like Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, when the idea of upgrading the relationship from a comprehensive partnership to in diplomatic terms, a strategic partnership has been discussed directly and openly with the Vietnamese leadership.

This idea has been discussed, I think, off and on for quite a while and never quite gotten over the finish line. And I'm wondering if we could get your perspective on why is it important and where might it be heading, and is there some reason for optimism that we're going to get across the finish line?

Marc Knapper: Well, thanks for that, Jonathan. And yes, I think if you Google my various public remarks, the press interviews, you name it, I do talk about quite often the, the desire, the US, strong US desire to upgrade our relationship from a comprehensive partnership which we've had for the last ten years to a strategic partnership. And really, I think it's, it's two things. First of all, I think it's just simply a reflection of what we were already doing with Vietnam. Our cooperative efforts with, with the government of Vietnam, are already fundamentally strategic in nature, whether it's the work we do together in the South China Sea, upholding our shared interests here in terms of protecting sovereignty and, and ensuring a free and open South China Sea, whether it's dealing with issues related to the Mekong River, whether it's addressing environmental issues, whether it's addressing issues related to transnational crimes.

Again, very fundamentally strategic. We work very closely with Vietnam, as I said earlier on health issues. What began as a very focused HIV AIDS effort back in 2004, 5, 6 is now multifaceted and a very broad effort together on everything from tuberculosis to COVID-19. And again, when you're addressing these kind of existential issues like global pandemics, how we do it together, whether it's surveillance, whether it's prevention, whether it's treatment, fundamentally strategic in nature, and climate change and energy, another couple of areas in which we're working very closely with Vietnam, climate mitigation and adaptation, working with Vietnam on energy, its energy transition as it seeks to, to actualize its very bold commitment to be net zero, carbon net zero by 2050. And we want to be a part of this discussion, and this is a fundamentally transformative effort one again, that is existential in nature, and this is something that we consider ourselves to be close partners and, and strategic ones at that. And so, really, it's, and so that's the sort of point one, which is the upgrade of the relationship is a reflection of what we've already got going on.

But I think I think the second point I make is that this upgrade, I think, would help to unlock even further the number of doors to even closer cooperation in a number of areas, whether it's with defense, law enforcement, security, high-level engagement, diplomatic and political cooperation, etc.

These are areas, I think, that taking it to the next level would allow us to be even more coordinated and more closely engaged with each other in the years ahead.

And as far as the, your final question, the prospects of this well of course, I'm a I'm a sort of eternal optimist. And, you know, I have but I still have a magic eight ball in my office, and I shake it every once in a while and I always get the answer, you know, signs are good or things are looking in the right direction. So I'm pretty optimistic. I think both of our well, I can't speak for the government of Vietnam, but certainly the government of the United States, we're very focused on making this happen and we're going to continue our efforts to that end.

Jonathan Stromseth: Yeah. Well, I'm delighted to hear that. And I've also noticed your many comments on this issue, as well as ambassador in Vietnam. Maybe if I could address perhaps the elephant in the room a little bit, you know, a, a kind of mantra that we hear from the region often as US-China rivalry ratchets up, and there is fears you know, about a potential new Cold War and so on, is that countries in the region, you know, with different nuances and perspectives, don't want to have to choose. And I think there's some analysis out there that is that maybe the Vietnamese might be a little bit concerned that a strategic partnership between the U.S. and Vietnam could be construed in Beijing as hostile to China. And so they have to consider this question very carefully.

And they do have a lot of economic integration with China and so on, where there could be potentially some blowback or leverage that China might exercise. And, and yet Vietnam has great concerns about their territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. And it seems like they're trying to expand relations in a multidirectional way, including with the United States. But I'm just wondering if you see that if you're able to comment as sort of contributing to a little bit of hesitancy on their side.

Marc Knapper: You know, I mean, I think, you know, Vietnam traditionally has, as you said, had multi-directional diplomacy, always endeavors to be friends with everyone, enemies with none. They've got a very clear position on the use of force in foreign, in foreign policy, which is that they will never use force in foreign policy. But I don't, I think there is intrinsic value in this relationship just as, as we will never talk about Vietnam in the context of our China policy, you know, we talk about Vietnam in the context of U.S. Vietnam relations. There is intrinsic value and strong US Vietnam ties. It's not about Vietnam or any of the countries in the region, for that matter being sort of pawns on a sort of strategic chessboard.

And so we we'd like to approach our relationship here in that sense to ensure that we continue to work together for our shared goals, which is ultimately, you know, we want a Vietnam that is strong and independent and prosperous. We want a Vietnam that's capable of defending its, its territorial integrity, protecting its sovereignty, ensuring that its international law is upheld in the South China Sea and elsewhere and that includes the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea from 1982. As Kamala Harris, Vice President Harris said last year, we respect each other's political systems. And so everything we do with Vietnam is about Vietnam. It's about our relationship. It's about promoting prosperity, security, stability, not just for the people of the United States, but the people of Vietnam. And so it will continue to do that. And whatever calculation are made here vis a vis the neighbors, that's not something for us to comment on.

But suffice to say that, you know, we do share a lot of interests, namely that the South China Sea remains free of coercion. As Secretary Blinken regularly says, we're not trying to force countries to make a choice, but they should have the ability to choose. And, and so that's something that I think a really wise approach, which is not just to places like Vietnam, but others, others here in the region. And so we'll continue to, to work with our friends here in Vietnam to ensure that everything we do is for the sake of not just the American people, but the Vietnamese people as well.

Jonathan Stromseth: Yeah. I think the region in general has welcomed the messaging from Secretary Blinken and others in the administration about not forcing countries to choose. I, I really noticed, what's interesting to me, and I think some of these things may be a little bit nascent, but you talked about shared interests. And I think also, you know, long term objectives that are shared between the United States and Vietnam. You know, one thing, a big development in the region, you know, is the development of the, the quad or the, the, the further development of the quad, the quadrilateral security dialogue with US, Australia, India and Japan. And some in ASEAN see this as maybe a little bit of a threat. Maybe that's too strong a word, but it's making the regional architecture a little bit crowded from an ASEAN-centric standpoint. But the Vietnamese seem a little more forward leaning compared to other ASEAN countries.

I know that they participated in what are sometimes called quad plus meetings related to coordination on the pandemic and other innovative areas of, of regional cooperation between the U.S. and Vietnam has been the establishment recently, I guess, of a new CDC regional office to support public health engagement of the U.S. in Southeast Asia as a whole, presumably, you know, in

coordination with Vietnam. So I think these are, I see as very positive developments about how there's some common thinking between the U.S. and Vietnam in Southeast Asia or in the region as a whole. Just wondering if you have any comment on that.

Marc Knapper: Sure. Well, you're, you're right. You mentioned this kind of although it was really never billed as a quad plus, I guess that, that's sort of the name that stuck. But, but during the pandemic, regular conversations among quad members, the United States, Australia, India and Japan, plus a couple of other countries, Vietnam and then New Zealand. And it was really an effort just to ensure that we were well coordinated when it came to, to vaccine distribution and provision of personal protective equipment, things like that.

But I think, I mean, if you look at, you know, what the quad is working on, I mean, it's, it's things that I think are appealing to, to the government of Vietnam, you know, whether it's in the health sphere or whether it's in maritime domain awareness, in other words, ensuring that countries have the ability to understand and know what's happening in their maritime space, in their territorial waters, and that includes ensuring that they have access to, you know, open source satellite data or radar data. You know, the quad, of course, works in other areas, supply chain issues, energy issues. And so, I mean, these are all things that we do bilaterally with Vietnam anyways. These aren't striking out on many new or novel areas of cooperation.

And so again, I'm hesitant to sort of try to be a spokesperson here for, for our Vietnamese friends. But my sense is that given what the quad's mandate is up until now, these are these are areas that are not just part of our approach to Vietnam, but actually are part of our broader Indo-Pacific strategy, which includes things related to a free and open Indo-Pacific, promoting ASEAN centrality, promoting prosperity, security, resilience in the face of climate issues and global pandemic issues. So, you know, while I'm certainly not going to try to advertise for an expanded quad or anything like that, I know that sometimes comes up, but I will say that I think our efforts within the context of the quad certainly reflect and complement very well our already strong bilateral efforts with, with Vietnam.

Thanks for raising the, the creation of the CDC, regional CDC office here in Hanoi, that was the announcement that Vice President Kamala Harris made when she was here last year. And I think it's a reflection of a couple of things. One, again, it's just really, I think it's a reflection of the strong confidence that we have in, in our Vietnamese partners in the health sphere. And this goes back to

the muscle memory that was built over almost two decades of health cooperation, starting with HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, COVID-19. And we felt that Vietnam had sort of the capability as a partner to play a good host for this, this regional organization, this regional effort.

And at the same time, I think it's a reflection certainly of the view that we have of Vietnam as a regional leader. I mean, they have done a really well, they were hosts of APEC, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation twice now, 2006 and '17. Of course, they were the ASEAN chair in 2000 and I want to say 20, in the middle of COVID, when, you know, it's always a challenge to be that the chair of ASEAN but it's even more so when, when you can't do anything in-person. But they pulled it off brilliantly through various means, virtual meetings, you name it. Vietnam was on the UN Security Council for two years, 2019 to 2021. And so increasingly we're seeing a Vietnam that's global, it's got a global viewpoint that, that wants to be a global player, and we certainly support that, and we support their role as a regional leader as well. And so things like the CDC office here that has a broad focus on the region is something I think we feel is very appropriate and has been very effective to date.

Jonathan Stromseth: Yeah, that, that, that's where I think maybe to kind of round out this discussion on, on a possible strategic partnership and then move on to other topics. You know, obviously there is there's some alignment, I think between the US and Hanoi on South China Sea issues as there are with, with other ASEAN partners in the region as well. But as one would look at the potential focus areas of a strategic partnership, I think obviously defense and security would be there. But some of these other issues like health, climate, which you raised earlier, and you know, even infrastructure and, you know, transparent development of infrastructure in Vietnam and the Mekong generally, I think these also, in my opinion, I think could bubble up and be key areas. I know there's already work in those areas, but I do think they could be expanded.

And I just one, one comment on climate perhaps and get your, your sense, you know, I think a lot of people might not know that the World Bank and other countries consistently ranked Vietnam as among the top five countries that are most vulnerable to global warming and rising sea levels because of the long coastline and low-lying areas and so on. And I think the Mekong Delta by 2050 could be, you know, significantly inundated with millions of migrants as a result. And I do think this seems like a great growth area given the Biden administration's focus on climate broadly. And I just wanted to flag this new \$15 billion joint energy transition partnership that the US is supporting with other G7 partners. And it seems like a great new initiative that that's still a work in progress, just announced I

think in December. But before we move on to other topics, just any, any final thoughts on climate or the strategic partnership question.

Marc Knapper: Well, thanks, and thanks for raising the impact of climate change in Vietnam. And it's been down to the Mekong Delta in the South a couple of times already. And it's not I mean, it is true, I mean, for sure, Vietnam is one of the top five most vulnerable countries to the effects of climate change. And what we're seeing in the Mekong Delta now, it's, it's a disaster unfolding before our eyes. You know, on the one hand, you have manmade if the sort of effects of, of, of man in the form of all the damming that's taking place on the Mekong River from, from China on down.

And what that's done is it's slowed down the flow of the river, it's prevented, you know, the kind of nutrients that come in the silt from, from flowing into Vietnam, of course, which is the very end of the river. And with that, with rising sea levels, you've got saltwater increasingly pushing in against a weakened flow of the river. It's, it's impacting, you've got increasingly salty water that farmers have to deal with. And so and this is the breadbasket of Vietnam. And so you've got not just sort of the manmade, the damming related issues, but just what's happening with climate and the rising sea levels. There's a lot of other things that are going on as well. But yeah, if by 2050, if something's not done, the Mekong Delta is going to be ocean and it's going to be a huge loss in terms not just of the agricultural and economic output of that area, but of the really rich riverine culture that has developed over hundreds of years there.

And so this is something that we, the United States government, are working very closely with Vietnam on our U.S. Agency of International Development, our U.S. Geological Survey, other American government organizations, State Department, of course, where we're down there in the Delta, we're trying to figure out how we can help Vietnam. This is something that former secretary of state and current senior, our special presidential envoy for climate, John Kerry is intensely focused on. And so we are with Vietnam in this, in a way that we were with Vietnam in the fight against COVID, this is this is real world, this is real world stuff, this is happening before our eyes. And so we need to work together to do something about it. And of course, the other side of the coin is, is the energy transition piece, which is another, another important aspect of our relationship.

Thanks for mentioning the one we call JETP, the Just Energy Transition Partnership. It's something we have now with three countries, South Africa, Indonesia and Vietnam, Vietnam is the third. And it's a \$15.5 billion that have been announced by governments, banks, businesses, NGOs

and the United States, the UK, the EU. And it's our way of working with Vietnam as they make this very hard transition away from fossil fuels like coal to solar and wind. And Vietnam is, you know, I guess cursed with being one of the most climate vulnerable countries in the world, but also blessed with some of the most abundant renewable potential in the world. Wind, solar.

I mean, it's just, it's cracking that code of regulatory changes and legal changes and figuring out and, you know, look, we're dealing with the United States as well, right. Taking care of, of workers in formal, former currencies like coal. How do you transition these kind of workers to renewable industries? And so but again, this is something that we're very committed to here, the Vietnamese are committed to, and we're just very, very eager together to try and help Vietnam meet its very ambitious climate goals again, 2050, to be net zero. And so no one, no one is underestimating the difficulty of this work. It's going to be tough. But, you know, we've, we've done tough things before and not just as a country but working with partners like Vietnam. And we're ready to, to succeed in this effort as well.

Jonathan Stromseth: Well, it's great to hear how, how the U.S. foreign policy is really focused and infused with energy on, on the climate front in general and in particularly vulnerable countries like Vietnam as well. Well, let's, let's if we could turn a little bit to maybe domestic developments in Vietnam. And as ambassador, I am not sure how much you want to wade into this territory, but I have to raise you know, Vietnam is such a stable political system in kind of five yearly cycles of party congresses and appointments of government officials shortly thereafter. But in the news very dramatically in the last couple of months was news of how an anti-corruption campaign that's been going on for years had resulted in some scandals and particularly resignations of two deputy prime ministers and the president, who is a former prime minister.

And there's different interpretations out there, I think one interpretation is that it's a kind of party led campaign to win factional battles and take out pro-reform and pro-Western leaders, which could have implications perhaps for foreign policy and U.S. Vietnam relations. Maybe, there is an alternative interpretation I've heard as well, which is this is really an effort by the party to sort of shore up its legitimacy through enhanced accountability mechanisms and probably long-term trends in foreign policy and economic reform won't be affected. But there could be some hiccups. I don't know if you agree with these interpretations, but any thoughts? Should we, those of us who follow this relationship closely, should we be worried?

Marc Knapper: Well, I think, I think you can I say, accurately captured I think the different views that are out there about what's going on. And I think you are also right to allude to sort of the difficulty is for someone in my position to try and wade too deeply into figuring out or talking publicly about what I think is going on here. But what I will say, what I can say is, you know, there's nothing here that would lead me to believe that the current trajectory that Vietnam is on with the United States is going to change or that has changed or that it is changing.

I think it's very clear to us and, you know, regardless of whatever changes are going on at the top as a result of this ongoing anti-corruption campaign, in spite of all that, what we see as a continued commitment by the government of Vietnam to improving, deepening, strengthening the relationship with the United States. And so whether it's formally welcoming senior American leaders, we just had a few days ago, our U.S. trade representative, Ambassador Katherine Tai, was here for some excellent conversations about our not just our bilateral trade relationship, but our multilateral trade efforts under the auspices of the Indo-Pacific economic framework.

We've got some very senior folks coming in the, in the time ahead of us, including, for example, members, you know, Cabinet members, which I don't know, I'm not sure if it hasn't been announced yet, so I'm going to head up and pause a second and just say that we do have some very senior folks coming, I don't want to get ahead of any public announcements, but all these things that we're seeing, none of them to me are a sign of a system that is somehow reconsidering its fundamental commitment to strengthening relations with the U.S., promoting prosperity, growing the economy, and essentially engaging closely with, with countries like Japan, like South Korea, like Australia, you know, allies and friends of the United States. And so very long and probably completely inconsequential answer to your question, Jonathan. But I do want to say that really, it's nothing here that to me that indicates that we're going to see any significant changes to the fundamental trajectory upon which Vietnam's foreign policy and economic policy are resting.

Jonathan Stromseth: You know, if I could ask one other kind of maybe difficult to answer question, but a big picture question, as you and other members of the Biden administration are, are seeking to improve relations with Vietnam and really, you know, take it to another level. And I think when you look at all the countries of Southeast Asia, in my opinion, I think, you know, we've got allies and partners, emerging partners, different categories. But it always seems like there's, there's so

much upside with Vietnam, maybe more, again, in my view, than, than, than just about any other country in the region.

But it's a bit ironic in some ways because our political systems are so utterly different. And, you know, at the end of the day, I've lived in both. Well, I should digress and say I have lived many years of my life in both Beijing and Hanoi. And so I understand there actually are great differences between the political systems in both countries. But at the end of the day, Vietnam is a one-party state headed by a Communist party. And I know if I'm getting this right, that the, the most recent annual human rights report issued by the State Department did refer to significant human rights issues in Vietnam. So I'm just wondering, as the administration and President Biden himself talks in broad terms about kind of a global struggle between democracy and autocracies in the world, how do you square the nature of the system there and the great interest of the U.S. to improving relations?

Marc Knapper: It's a good question and, and you know, if you go back to July of 2021, when I appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to for my confirmation hearing, this is one of the points that I made about, you know, ongoing concerns related to human rights and that our two countries would never reach their, our fullest potential unless we saw certain improvements. And, you know, this is we stand by this, you know, we stay true to our values. As Vice President Harris said when she was here last year, we're not always going to see eye to eye on these things, but we do express our differences in a way that's, that's respectful, but at the same time frank and not always in public. And so, you know, and we've we have tried to abide by that.

You know, when we deal with these issues, certainly, we have our differences. And we recently, a few weeks ago, months ago, well even, had our most recent iteration of our human rights dialogue. And we did raise concerns related to civil society or issues related to certain individuals who've been detained. But, you know, frankly, we also heard from our Vietnamese counterparts' concerns related in the United States to gun violence, violence against Asians and Asian-Americans, you know, racial discrimination. And so, you know, none of us is perfect. But we do continue to sort of express our concerns both ways in a way that is respectful, open, frank, but often private and sort of behind the scenes. We don't, we try not to have these debates on the front page of the newspaper.

So it's, you know, I was here 15 years ago, these are discussions that we got, we often had as well. It's a work in progress and we continue to seek improvements, but at the same time recognizing that our systems are different. And but we do respect each other's political systems. And

we've made that clear. We've made that clear for the last decade plus. And, you know, we'll continue to, to work together to advance our interests, but also address our differences.

Jonathan Stromseth: Thanks, Ambassador. Another topic I thought we could touch on a little bit is what is the state of play now in the security and defense relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam? I think, you know, Vietnam has a long history of procuring Russian defense systems. I understand the trend line is going down so that Hanoi is beginning to diversify and recently held, I think, a defense expo that was part of that effort. But the U.S. has been providing, I think, a couple refurbished Coast Guard cutters to the Vietnamese Navy and maybe another one on the way. Quite dramatic in the context of, you know, the war that was fought between our two countries, the arrival of aircraft carriers visiting ports in in in Vietnam. I'm just wondering if you could tell us a little bit about, you know, where this is, what are the latest developments and where is this relationship heading on the defense and security side?

Marc Knapper: Well, thanks, and it's, I think as we deepen our defense and security ties, I think, again, it's a reflection of our shared, our shared interests, our shared interests in a region that's stable and free and open. And the countries here are able to resist coercion and are able to defend and protect their maritime interests, their territorial integrity, their sovereignty. And this is something which we work very closely with Vietnam. You mentioned the provision of Coast Guard cutters. And these are I mean, these are big ships, actually. I visited one and it's, it's a, it's a pretty significant vessel, but it's, it's Coast Guard and it's going to be part of Vietnam, it is part of Vietnam's Coast Guard and, and it's there to ensure that Vietnam is able to defend its interests, whether it's counter-piracy, whether it's, you know, pushing back against illegal, unregulated, unreported fishing in its waters.

So it's about, you know, defending protecting Vietnam's natural resources. And we're working with Vietnam to ensure that it's got the capabilities it needs to defend its interests, whether in the air or the sea, on land and in cyberspace. There was the first ever defense trade expo last December, which was a pretty big deal. And it reflected, I think, you know, Vietnam's efforts to, to diversify and modernize its military. You're correct that the vast, sort of the very large chunk of Vietnam's defense ecosystem is Russian based. And so certainly, as Vietnam does work on diversifying and modernizing its defense equipment, you know, the United States and our great defense companies, we want to be

part of that. And this is something certainly a conversation that is ongoing and will continue, continue into the future.

You know, it's, we I mean, we definitely see cyber as another area of cooperation. And so, I mean, we're working on cybersecurity together with Vietnam to ensure that they're able to protect their, their critical cyber infrastructure as they are increasingly connected with, with the world and as Vietnamese companies and American companies in Vietnam are increasingly engaged in commerce globally. So I'm excited about our defense and security relationship. I mean if you take it a step further, law enforcement is another area that we work closely, whether it's working together to fight against trafficking in persons, which remains a problem here, women, men, children being trafficked into neighboring countries, whether it's working against traffic and wildlife, illegal wildlife trafficking, whether it's counternarcotics cooperation, these are all areas in which we're working very closely together in.

These are the kind of areas where there's law enforcement, security, defense that require a certain level of trust, right. And then these are things we couldn't do ten, 15 years ago. But the fact that we're able to do this now together, I think, really does reflect a new level of engagement, of trust, of shared sense of mission, that you're right, frankly, our, if you pull back a little and look, I mean, we were fighting against each other not more than 50 years ago. And so to get from there to here, I think is a remarkable testament to, to the efforts of both of our countries to, to move forward and find a good future together.

Jonathan Stromseth: And speaking, speaking of the war and maybe an aspect that has helped to enhance that trust is efforts to address the legacy of war issues like unexploded ordinance, landmines, search for MIAs, and so on. What's the latest state of play in that space?

Marc Knapper: So thanks. And this is an important, really important area of cooperation that really predates even normalization, you know, we normalized in 1995, but our efforts together to account for, you know, U.S. service members began even a few years before then. And it really and we do so when we talk about this, these sort of the broad basket of issues of war legacy, war legacy issues, which includes accounting for missing service members and includes mitigating cleaning up unexploded ordnance, whether its landmines or borders or bombs that, you know, we dropped or during the war and so and this is significant because you've got huge, huge swaths of land in central Vietnam mostly, but all over the place, that can't be cultivated, can't be used because of concerns that

there's still, you know, a meter down in the soil, there's still something, unexploded mortar shell or a landmine.

And so, you know, over the last ten years or more, the United States is working with Vietnam to clean up to clean up this what they call UXO, unexploded ordnance. Our war legacy cooperation also includes cleaning Agent Orange hotspots, they're called, which is not where we sprayed Agent Orange, because actually Agent Orange dissipates or dissolves quite quickly under sunlight, but these are, they're called hotspots because they're the sites of basically air bases that we used during the war to fly missions to spray Agent Orange. And so you can picture drums, you know, dozens, hundreds of drums of this stuff just sitting there seeping into the soil and remain there for decades. And again, it's prevented any sort of useful use of that land.

And so we have been working with Vietnam to clean these up. And it's a huge effort, it's very costly, time consuming. But we've done it now at two different air bases, we're working on the third, and it's going to take another ten years, but by succeeding here, not only do we allow this land to be used effectively for habitation, cultivation, whatever, but it's built trust and it's built, really helped to accelerate reconciliation between our two countries, same as the efforts we've had to assist people with disabilities. And so these efforts are ongoing. These efforts are thanks to a number of members of Congress, a number of very concerned citizens, folks here and Vietnam as well.

I mean, this relationship got to where it is today, not by a vacuum, it didn't just appear out of nowhere, it took the hard work and goodwill of many, many, many people on both sides, Vietnam and the United States and the courageous efforts by many on both sides. And you think about individuals like John McCain, John Kerry, Patrick Leahy, members of our Senate who, who without whose efforts we wouldn't be here today. And but these efforts continue in terms of dealing with these war legacy issues. And, you know, we really count on leadership in both countries and then the goodwill, again, of the American and Vietnamese people to ensure that these efforts are able to continue.

Jonathan Stromseth: Well, thanks for laying that out for us. Finally, I think we should dig into the economic aspects of the relationship a little bit. And, you know, I think there was quite a reaction or a level of concern in Hanoi when at the beginning of the Trump administration, the U.S. pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership or TPP. And there had been a lot of negotiations that went into that from both the U.S. and Vietnamese sides and all the other countries involved. But now we have what is called IPEF or the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for prosperity, and I understand Vietnam has

joined. I'm wondering if you could touch on IPEF and what it means for Vietnam and whether it's going to be some, you know, catalytic or important to the economic relationship.

Marc Knapper: Yes. And so IPEF, as you said, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, which was launched last May by the United States and 13 other countries, including Vietnam. And really, it's a signal and a strong reflection of the Biden administration's commitment to economic engagement in the region. But it's meant to be more than just a trade agreement because it takes on issues that traditional trade agreements just have just not touched, whether it's things like the digital economy and, you know, how do we use digital economy to promote prosperity in all of our countries? This, this the framework addresses issues like sustainable infrastructure. You know, how do we ensure that as we grow our economies and build infrastructure, particularly energy related infrastructure, how do we make sure that that we're doing it in a way that is green and clean and sustainable and not reliant on fossil fuels like coal? This framework is meant to address issues related to, of course, climate change, but also labor issues.

Of course, a very strong tenet of the Biden administration is ensuring that our foreign policy works for the middle class and that our foreign policy and economic policy, trade policy support our, you know, labor in the United States. And so this is another area of discussion with, with all the members of IPEF. And so we're, we've had a couple of Minister level-meetings, we continue to have sort of senior official level meetings as we hammer out the different aspects of this of this IPEF, of this framework. But we're very glad that, you know, Vietnam joined us back in back in May, as one of the chartering, charter members of this gathering and continue to talk with them bilaterally and multilaterally. This is one of the things that when we had our U.S. trade representative, Katherine Tai, here a number of days ago, she discussed with very senior members of Vietnam's government.

And so at the end of the day though, this is really meant, I think, to reflect the fact that the United States is an Indo-Pacific power. The United States is committed to this region. The United States is committed to this region's economic success and prosperity for all the peoples here. And so I think you'll see that going forward, we'll hear more and more about it as our colleagues at the U.S. Trade Representative Office, Department of Commerce, continue to work on this with their colleagues around the region. Of course, what makes this year 2023 also significant is it's the year the United States is once again hosting APEC. And so our APEC's efforts will dovetail really well with our IPEF efforts. Sorry, folks out there, it's a lot of acronyms, but really this is the year for the United States to

showcase the reality that we are fully committed economically to this region because we are an Indo-Pacific power, we recognize that our prosperity and security are derived from close, closely knit and integrated economic trade investment relations with all the countries here.

Jonathan Stromseth: Also, I wanted to just ask a little bit about you've mentioned sustainable infrastructure, or transparent interest, infrastructure a couple of times. We've also talked about the Just Energy Transition Partnership initiative that was recently announced. Another thing in that G-7 orbit is a new 600 billion global infrastructure initiative among the group of seven in the world.

And I think about this in the Vietnamese and Mekong context a little, there's a saying I hear sometimes in the region when I travel to Southeast Asia, where people say, we focus so much on the sea, we forgot about the land. And it's with regard to concerns about growing Chinese political influence in the sense that obviously the Southeast Asia -- excuse me, the South China Sea issue's critical, but perhaps China is achieving some of its strategic goals and objectives in the region through economic statecraft. And, and so I'm wondering, what are the chances we're going to see perhaps increased infrastructure cooperation among G7 partners like the U.S. and Japan and Australia, for instance, perhaps in Vietnam, but in the Mekong region generally?

Marc Knapper: Well, we, I think we've got some great tools at our disposal as we look at promoting infrastructure development, sustainable infrastructure development in a way that that doesn't overburden countries here with onerous debt responsibilities and other sort of strings that might be attached to assistance that we've received from other countries. And one of our goals is to try and unlock the private capital that's out there of the United States. We you know, U.S. corporations funds invest more in Southeast Asian and the region than every other country combined. We have over \$1 trillion in investment stock throughout the region. We know that the ability of our private sector is to promote development, to promote infrastructure growth.

And so some of the new tools we have or not so much anymore, I guess, but the Development Finance Corporation, Trade Development Agency, Ex-Im Bank, all these are all really powerful tools that we have in our toolbox to work with our private sector, to work with host governments here to ensure that they're able to meet their development needs and their infrastructure needs, but in a way that's on their terms and in a way that's free of coercion, that's free, again, of attached strings that they may end up regretting down the line.

So I very much see the United States in the mix here as we talk and we talk all the time with our partners in Australia and Japan and South Korea about how again we want to avoid duplicative efforts, we want to avoid redundancy. We want to ensure that we're all working at the same goal and hopefully our efforts will complement each other. And we do this through the partnerships, the Japan-US Mekong Power Partnership of course is one, the quad is another, the US Japan Strategic Energy Partnership. I mean, there's many, many different ways that we are coordinating with our friends, allies and partners in the region. And certainly we see Vietnam as a country in which we want to ensure that we're working very closely with our friends and allies, but in a way, of course, that, you know, we want to make sure that it's right for Vietnam and it's right for their own development and infrastructure goals.

Jonathan Stromseth: Thanks. Before we wrap up here, let me take a question from, from the audience. This question is from Mai Tran of Radio Free Asia, a journalist who asks, Ambassador Knapper spoke about the good relationship between Vietnam and the U.S. in many areas. But what are the issues that may prevent the two countries from making their relationship stronger? What could undermine the relationship? Is the human rights issue in Vietnam a problem undermining the two countries' relations?

Marc Knapper: Well, thanks for that, Mai Tran. I think I mean, getting back to what I what I said earlier and, you know, sort of quoting even farther back my Senate testimony as I was being confirmed, it naturally, we're going to have differences in areas of human rights. And I, but I think it's how we address those differences that's really important. And I think that as long as we remain respectful of each other, as long as we ensure that we're speaking clearly and ensuring that we, we are true to our values, the United States, they will continue to push, to push these areas with our Vietnamese counterparts, just as they're going to continue to push to push things with us. And so but I want to make sure that we know we're always doing it in a way that's respectful, that is frank, that's also, you know, again, as I said, we're remaining you know, we're adhering closely to the values that are very important to us as a nation.

Jonathan Stromseth: Finally, just any unexplored areas of the relationship or new innovative things going on that people aren't talking about but from your, your seat as ambassador of the United States in Hanoi maybe you know something about that's not necessarily in the news, but you think is important.

Marc Knapper: I just, it always fascinates me just to see the growth of Vietnam's role, both as a regional power but as global one increasingly, you know, we've got Vietnamese peacekeepers now in South Sudan and Central African Republic, like Vietnam sent scores of not just soldiers, but police, police officers to Turkey to assist with the, to the disaster relief there. I think one area I would also mention that we haven't really talked about is education. And this is something that is so foundational as well to our two countries' relationship. You know, the Fulbright program predates our normalization, dates back to 1993. And it really was, it was elemental in bringing Vietnamese to the United States to learn about our system, to learn about our politics and our, you know, economics. And, and many of these folks have emerged as leaders in their own right here in Vietnam. Vietnam is now the fifth largest sender of students to the United States after India, China, South Korea and one other. But, but to be fifth is just really amazing.

And I think it's a testament to a couple of things. One, I think is the great sort of commitment that that Vietnamese have to education, our recognition, the importance of, you know sort of learning about the outside world, learning English. But it's also a reflection, I think, of the great and the deep well of goodwill here towards the United States and the fact that folks, so many folks think highly of the US. I mean, polling here shows 96% of the people are favorably inclined to the US, which is a remarkable figure. And we just I think it's this education that's going to be the foundation of, continue to be the foundation upon which our two countries are, are tied together. We have a university, Fulbright University Vietnam, which has sort of morphed from the Fulbright program into this kind of American style institution, four-year college down in Ho Chi Minh City that's educating young Vietnamese and others. So you've got an American university plopped down in in Vietnam. And so it's pretty amazing.

And again, it's a testament, I think, to the vision and the commitment of many, many people in both countries to growing our two, our two, the relationship between us and recognizing that everything we do and everything we're going to do going forward stands on the shoulders of the kind of bridges and people to people ties that education and other exchanges are building every day, big ways and small. And so the reason I'm so bullish and optimistic about this relationship is that there is a lot of goodwill there. I mean, there are challenges, of course, but we address them in a way, again, that's respectful and fair. But at the end of the day, this is a relationship that's going places. It's on an

upward trajectory and it's one that's really exciting to be a part of. And I'm honored to serve here as ambassador.

Jonathan Stromseth: Well, on that upbeat note, I think we should wrap up. It's 10:00 here in the morning and in the evening for you. Thanks for staying up and helping us navigate and better understand both developments within Vietnam and the region, but you know how that comes to bear on the relationship between the United States and Vietnam going forward. So thanks to Ambassador Knapper for joining us and we look forward to doing this again sometime.

Marc Knapper: Yeah, absolutely. I'm, I'm, I'm always happy to do these events. I'm always happy to tout the U.S. Vietnam relationship. And I'm really just super proud of all the work folks here in our embassy and our consul general do every day, both Americans and Vietnamese, we've got a lot of people here working real hard on behalf of this relationship. And so I'm really proud to be part of the same team as they.

Jonathan Stromseth: Alright, well, thanks again, and we'll be in touch.