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# Public Diplomacy in Vietnam: Building a Communication Aligned Model for a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership <sup>[1]</sup>

Last year marked the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam. In the years leading up to this milestone, Vietnam had sent more students to the U.S. than at any time in history, bilateral trade reached record highs, and the two countries achieved more diplomatic breakthroughs than at any time since normalization.

Moreover, the two countries also recognized fifty years since the end of the war and a historic double upgrade from a Comprehensive Partnership to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, the highest level of diplomatic relations with Vietnam. These milestones were the result of reconciliation, relentless diplomacy, and a public diplomacy strategy. What I offer below is a framework, with texture, of how public diplomacy in Vietnam drove a narrative of American leadership through a communication-aligned model between 2022–2025.

## **Authoritative and Credible Voices**

Our public diplomacy teams worked to deliver the ambassador's vision to create public support for an upgrade in bilateral relations. When he arrived, the bilateral relationship was strategic in all but name. (**Note:** A "strategic partnership" in Vietnam's system is the second highest level of diplomatic relations; the highest is Comprehensive Strategic Partnership). We didn't feel that our comprehensive partnership reflected that the U.S. was the largest export market for Vietnamese products; that Vietnam was leading sender of students to study in the U.S. in Southeast Asia; that Vietnam has donated 250,000 pieces of PPE during the pandemic; that the U.S. had donated more than 44 million vaccines; and that U.S. private sector companies and universities had invested billions into Vietnam. So, from a point of recognition and cooperation, we delivered our message plainly and directly to the Vietnamese people: the time had come to upgrade to a strategic partnership. Our assumption was that if we sustain Vietnam's overall positive opinion of the United States while demonstrating reliability through consistent external engagement, we could build public support by ensuring that key U.S. figures spoke with a unified voice. To begin with, our public diplomacy strategy involved deploying our forward-leaning, media-savvy Ambassador. This proved to be our greatest asset.

We booked our ambassador for an interview on a popular Vietnamese program to make the case for a Strategic Partnership upgrade. What surprised us was that there was no censoring or spin to our viewpoint. In fact, thanks to the foundation that previous ambassadors had already laid, this wasn't the first time the prospect of an upgrade had been in the ether, and it was already understood as a possibility on both sides. Where we did face obstacles was in addressing geopolitical tensions, particularly concerns about U.S.-China competition. We outlined that our relationship was bilateral in nature, and that message held.

We were consistent with our narrative that our relationship needed to be upgraded. Before long, the message began to echo in press coverage and TV commentary, indicating that Vietnam, a controlled media environment, was listening. As colleagues conducted private diplomacy with counterparts, public diplomacy provided the public with facts. Over time, reporters and audiences asked us to go deeper. With each visiting congressional delegation, cabinet-level visit, and senior official, we ensured the message stayed the same. Over the course of our campaign, we maintained a steady drumbeat of engagement. Our team matched the outlet to the objective, pitching where it mattered most to opinion leaders.

Coordination was essential to maintaining message discipline. We conducted monthly interagency communications meetings—a successful model employed at other posts—that provided all agencies and teams insight into the media environment and allowed them to report back to their headquarters. By centering public diplomacy as the node for all strategic communications, public engagement, and content development, we created alignment across the mission. As spokesperson, I chaired the committee with guidance from senior leadership, and this proved a powerful convening mechanism for agencies to come suggest ideas or better understand the information environment.

## **In-Person Engagement**

The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs offers a deep toolbox for public diplomacy practitioners to advance key policy objectives. Understanding that American foreign policy is best served in an open information space where economic and security goals can be pursued transparently, our public diplomacy team in Vietnam convened spokespersons from each of the nation's provinces for a two-day ECA TechCamp on information dissemination, strategic communication, and media relations. The program opened with a plenary led by our Ambassador and Vietnam's Deputy Foreign Minister. American and Vietnamese experts shared lessons on effective media relations and communication strategy, with particular focus on media engagement and intergovernmental collaboration on communications. We also shared with the 63 participants the critical role that free speech played in creating effective relations with media, avoiding false information, and contributing to a trusted information ecosystem. While not a cure-all in a state-managed media environment, the event showed the promise of local actors as valuable partners in advancing shared foreign policy aims.

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## **"When public diplomacy is at the table from the start, communication becomes strategy rather than an afterthought."**

Our Department of War (then-Defense) colleagues regularly worked with public diplomacy throughout the planning of high-level engagements to ensure public messaging reinforced strong security cooperation through ship visits, humanitarian work, and joint activities. These included visits by an aircraft carrier, senior military officials, and ongoing POW/MIA recovery operations. This wasn't solely a public diplomacy achievement. Department of War and public diplomacy colleagues worked deliberately to build trust and establish a unified communications strategy. We attended their meetings, learned the language of defense cooperation, and relied on key teammates, like our political-military officer, to translate when misunderstandings occurred. Regularizing messaging on bilateral military cooperation expressed U.S. support for reconciliation initiatives like dioxin remediation, as well as maritime security, helping to reinforce the strength of the security partnership among the Vietnamese public.

Our public diplomacy team regularly supported colleagues from the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Commerce in their commercial diplomacy. We didn't just include our language in their talking points, but also made sure they understood how to communicate tangible outcomes of deepening partnership. We promoted the critical importance of USDA's Fertilize Right program, which shared American excellence in managing soil health and sustainable farming practices, by securing key subject matter expert media placements and making plain the benefits of what might otherwise seem like a technical agricultural matter. These efforts strengthened ties while promoting and supporting American farmers, ranchers, and manufacturers.

### **Technology: An Invaluable Partner in PD**

Digital diplomacy was the tip of the spear for our communication efforts. Before shaping a narrative, we aligned resources with outcomes and made sure our technology matched our strategy. We went from relying solely on public-opinion surveys to using social-media analytics and eventually third-party platform data to refine outreach to key audiences. As a pilot post for the State Department's AI implementation, we used State Chat , a Department LLM, and Northstar, an AI-powered digital analytic tool that gave insights on the media landscape and global narratives. Integrating these Department investments allowed us to track down, translate, and follow media narratives in real time, measure engagement, and ensure that communications stayed aligned with U.S. policy priorities.

From sports diplomacy videos to digital campaigns celebrating agricultural trade and innovation, we learned to communicate at the speed of relevance. When the United States gained market access for California peaches in 2024, our tailored digital announcement went viral, creating genuine excitement and contributing to strong early sales. But this success came after rejecting a few creative ideas, uncertain about the right tone. On one occasion, our staff put out a meme relating to a popular Korean love story in which one of the character's names resembled Vietnam's World Cup qualifier opponent. By playing on the name, we showed competence and good humor in promoting U.S. engagement in sports diplomacy.

After that campaign went viral, I learned to better understand and trust my team's instincts—that while not all fun content might be appropriate, levity does provide a sense of personality to our already credible platform.

Beyond data, narrative monitoring helped us track sentiment and promote transparency by identifying and addressing misunderstandings or misinformation. Our messaging on visa misuse, for example, resonated with Vietnamese students preparing to study in the United States and was amplified by local influencers. Watching those messages spread organically signaled meaningful engagement. By maintaining consistent messaging across digital platforms and in-person events, particularly around border security and migration, we clarified misunderstandings about the border being closed to travelers and made clear that only legal pathways remained.

## Lessons Learned

Every public diplomacy officer knows the famous Edward R. Murrow quote: “If you want me on the landings, I’d better be there for the takeoffs,” underscoring the importance of communication strategy in the policy planning process. At U.S. Mission Vietnam, that principle held true. Our leadership understood the power of public diplomacy and worked with us to build momentum for stronger ties that culminated in a double upgrade to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and helped build a future-oriented trajectory that will frame the next 30 years of bilateral relations.

Several lessons emerged from this experience that may prove useful to public diplomacy practitioners in other challenging environments:

1. **Trust remains most fundamental:** Trust on all sides— between sections, principals and staffers, and most importantly between interlocutors—is the foundation of effective public diplomacy.
2. **Put American interests first:** We cannot lose sight that the social and cultural capital we earn should be spent on creating an environment in which we engage on tough topics like reciprocal trade, maritime security, and illegal immigration.
3. **Social media insights do not always translate to tangible outcomes, and that’s okay:** Likes and shares might denote when we are or aren’t hitting the mark. Use these measures to improve content. Viral moments create visibility, but sustained messaging creates credibility.
4. **Public diplomacy officers are political officers with money:** Public diplomacy should consistently lead other sections in strategic public engagement by stewarding taxpayer dollars toward both short and long-term goals. When public diplomacy is at the table from the start, communication becomes strategy rather than an afterthought.

I knew public diplomacy had made an impact in Vietnam when my counterparts consistently referenced our social media products and young people asked if we were going to upgrade relations. Disentangling public diplomacy's contribution from economic and geopolitical interest or Vietnam’s own strategic calculus remains difficult, but public diplomacy did create the space in which those other factors could effectively operate more. As we continue to navigate an increasingly complex information environment, we must make sure models like this one become standard practice, rather than exceptional.????????????????

