

U.S.-Vietnam Cultural Diplomacy Through Educational Cooperation: From Knowledge Connectivity to Soft Power Enhancement (2013-Present)

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ABSTRACT: This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the role of educational and training cooperation as a strategic pillar in advancing soft power, cultural diplomacy, and knowledge connectivity between Vietnam and the United States from 2001 to the present. Through the theoretical lenses of Constructivism and Soft Power, the paper examines the mechanisms through which education has driven a fundamental transformation in the structure of bilateral relations, evolving from a legacy of past hostility into a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2023. Utilizing qualitative research methods, policy document analysis, and case studies, the research highlights the dramatic expansion in both the scale and quality of international student mobility. Furthermore, it delves into iconic cooperative frameworks, notably Fulbright University Vietnam and the International Technology Security and Innovation (ITSI) Fund initiative in the semiconductor sector. This intellectual integration enhances Vietnam's national capacity, reinforces its technological autonomy, and firmly positions the nation as an innovative, dynamic, and deeply integrated actor on the global stage.

KEYWORDS: Cultural diplomacy, Soft power, U.S.–Vietnam relations, Educational cooperation, Public diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION

In the architecture of contemporary global politics, where complex interdependence is increasingly replacing traditional paradigms of confrontation, soft power and public diplomacy have firmly established themselves as indispensable instruments of statecraft and foreign policy. Within the Asia-Pacific geopolitical landscape in general, and the structure of U.S.–Vietnam bilateral relations in particular, the process of reconciliation and rapprochement is widely recognized by international scholars as one of the most comprehensive and remarkable transformations in post-Cold War international relations. In this landmark trust-building process, education and training have transcended conventional academic exchanges to establish themselves as a core strategic pillar. The extraordinary trajectory from former battlefield adversaries to a Comprehensive Partnership in 2013, and ultimately elevating to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2023, is fundamentally inseparable from the solid foundations laid by people-to-people interactions and extensive knowledge-sharing networks.

The year 2001 marked a profound symbolic and practical milestone with the passage and implementation of the Vietnam Education Foundation (VEF) Act by the U.S. Congress. This initiative directly opened doors for hundreds of Vietnam's elite scholars to access top-tier U.S. education, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Building upon that pioneering bridge, the educational cooperation ecosystem between the two nations has experienced exponential growth in scale, depth, and diversity. Iconic educational and development institutions such as Fulbright University Vietnam (FUV) and large-scale higher education capacity-building projects funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) are driving profound structural transformations, helping reshape governance mindsets and research capabilities across Vietnam's public higher education system.

This paper aims to comprehensively analyze the landscape of U.S.–Vietnam educational and training cooperation over the past decade (2013 to the present) through the analytical lenses of cultural diplomacy and international relations.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH METHODS

To decode the complex mechanism of U.S.–Vietnam educational cooperation, this study harmoniously integrates Joseph Nye's Soft Power Theory and Constructivism in International Relations. Unlike hard power, which relies on coercion, soft power operates through the attractiveness of culture, political values, and legitimate foreign policy (Nye, 2004). The flexible combination of these two power dynamics constitutes "smart power": (i) On the U.S. side: Education serves as the most effective conduit for projecting soft power. The presence of Vietnamese students in the United States, alongside American educational institutions operating in Vietnam, fosters critical thinking, transparency, and an innovative mindset, thereby captivating the intellectual elite through superior

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academic quality (Nguyen Thu Thao, 2019). (ii) On the Vietnamese side: Core appeal stems from a strong spirit of national independence and self-reliance, dynamic economic development, and a culture of tolerance (Dang Dinh Quy, 2024). Cultural diplomacy acts as a vital catalyst, transforming static cultural resources into dynamic geopolitical strength.

Constructivism posits that the international system is profoundly shaped by ideational factors such as identity, trust, and social norms (Wendt, 1999). The historical trajectory of U.S.-Vietnam relations from former hostility to trusted partnership cannot be explained solely through pragmatic power-balancing calculations; rather, it represents a patient process of bilateral identity reconstruction. Through cooperation in addressing war legacies, medical assistance, and particularly education, both nations have dismantled historical prejudices to co-construct a new framework of cooperation: mutual respect for independence, sovereignty, and each other's political systems (Ninh Son & Thanh The, 2023). Educational cooperation provides an ideal space for ideational interaction, enabling both sides to fundamentally reframe their mutual perceptions.

This study adopts a predominantly qualitative methodology, integrating policy document analysis with case study methods to deliver a comprehensive, objective, and multi-dimensional analysis: (i) Document Analysis and Statistical Data: The research examines an extensive corpus of primary and secondary policy documents of high legal and strategic significance. To substantiate qualitative arguments, statistical data on international student flows are extracted directly from the *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange* published annually by the Institute of International Education (IIE) from 2021 to 2025, alongside the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) database of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. (ii) Case Studies: Anchored in a comprehensive constructivist framework, the study selects four highly representative cooperative models spanning different dimensions of knowledge transfer and cultural diplomacy: (1) Fulbright University Vietnam (FUV) and its precursor, the Vietnam Education Foundation (VEF), representing elite institutional partnerships designed to inform policy formulation; (2) The Peace Corps, representing grassroots people-to-people diplomacy through linguistic and cultural exchange; (3) The Semiconductor Ecosystem Development Initiative under the International Technology Security and Innovation (ITSI) Fund, representing high-tech security cooperation and strategic global supply chain integration; and (4) The Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI), serving as a platform for future regional connectivity.

THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF U.S.-VIETNAM EDUCATIONAL COOPERATION AND ACADEMIC DIPLOMACY (2013-PRESENT)

The landscape of U.S.-Vietnam educational cooperation has evolved along a trajectory that genuinely reflects the deepening level of political trust between the two nations. In the initial period following the normalization of diplomatic relations (1995) and the signing of the Bilateral Trade Agreement (2000), despite flourishing economic exchanges, lingering legacies of the past and ideological apprehensions persisted within both societies. Against this backdrop, the passage of the Vietnam Education Foundation (VEF) Act by the U.S. Congress in late 2000 - officially implemented in January 2001 - created a genuine "tipping point" for academic diplomacy. With an annual committed budget of \$5 million spanning nearly two decades until 2019, the VEF was not merely a conventional aid program; it represented a deliberate strategy aimed at elite capacity building. The foundation sponsored over 600 Vietnamese scholars and graduate students to pursue advanced studies at leading U.S. research institutions, focusing exclusively on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Upon returning, these scholars provided high-quality human capital that helped guide Vietnam's scientific development, while serving as living building blocks of invaluable political trust and weaving a tight-knit academic network between the intellectual communities of both nations (Nguyễn, 2025).

The smooth and effective development of micro-level educational exchanges established solid psychological and practical foundations for top-level political agreements. Within the framework of the 2013 Joint Statement establishing the Comprehensive Partnership between President Truong Tan Sang and President Barack Obama at the White House, educational and scientific-technological cooperation was formally designated and codified as one of nine core cooperative pillars (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2013). Subsequently, during General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's historic visit to the United States in July 2015, the Joint Vision Statement reaffirmed both nations' commitment to expanding investment in educational institutions, enhancing laboratory capacities, and deepening ties toward a sustainably prosperous future (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2015). By President Obama's 2016 visit to Vietnam, the full lifting of the lethal arms embargo was accompanied by key soft-power achievements, including granting the operational license to Fulbright University Vietnam and establishing the Peace Corps English teaching agreement (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2016).

However, the most monumental milestone reshaping the structure of bilateral relations occurred in September 2023, when both nations issued a Joint Statement elevating their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership during President Joe Biden's visit. Unlike past diplomatic statements that were often broad in scope, this historic document sharply and decisively prioritized cooperation in core technology sectors, including semiconductor microchips, artificial intelligence (AI), and digital innovation. Both countries recognized the urgent imperative of investing in human capital, regarding it as an essential asset for security and prosperity. Leading academic institutions on both sides were called upon to expand expert exchanges and strengthen STEM education networks

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to cultivate a high-caliber workforce serving these critical industries (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2023). In essence, the institutional framework of educational cooperation has evolved dramatically - from a U.S.-assisted mechanism for foundational capacity building and breaking embargo barriers in the 2000s, to establishing strategic technology partnership networks aimed at safeguarding and shaping secure global supply chains in the 2020s. The U.S.-Vietnam academic diplomacy ecosystem does not operate as a unidirectional conduit; rather, it is multi-dimensional and multi-tiered, encompassing every dimension of both the political superstructure and social infrastructure. These initiatives span from cultivating leadership elites and advancing macro-systemic governance reforms to enhancing grassroots language proficiency and driving efforts to master global technological frontiers.

FULBRIGHT UNIVERSITY VIETNAM (FUV) AND THE LEGACY OF FETP: A "POLICY LABORATORY" EVOLVING INTO A LIBERAL ARTS INSTITUTION

Today, Fulbright University Vietnam (FUV) stands as one of the most prominent and successful symbols of bilateral academic diplomacy. The origins of this institution date back to 1994–1995 with the inception of the Fulbright Economics Teaching Program (FETP) - a bold and groundbreaking collaborative initiative between the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City (UEH), championed by dedicated figures such as Thomas Vallely. Against the backdrop of 1990s Vietnam, which was taking its first tentative steps toward opening up and transitioning from a centrally planned economy to a socialist-oriented market economy, FETP served as an invaluable, pioneering "policy laboratory" (Le Linh Chi, 2025).

The unique strength driving the knowledge transfer of FETP (and later FUV) lay in introducing Harvard's classic case-study teaching methodology into the Vietnamese context. Rather than mechanically replicating microeconomic and macroeconomic textbooks from distant American universities, faculty members meticulously contextualized global theories within localized economic and cultural frameworks. Highly practical economic case studies from Vietnam, Southeast Asia, and Latin America - such as the privatization of the water supply system in Cancún, Mexico - were dissected in the classroom, enabling students to analyze market dynamics, recognize market failures, and comprehend appropriate state interventions (Xuan Linh, 2020).

In 2016, inheriting the intellectual legacy and relational networks of FETP, the Fulbright School of Public Policy and Management (FSPPM) was formally established as the foundational academic unit of Fulbright University Vietnam (FUV) - the nation's first independent, non-profit institution dedicated to a comprehensive liberal arts education. Championing academic autonomy, transparency, and critical thinking, this institution has nurtured over 1,400 alumni hailing from 61 of Vietnam's 63 provinces and cities over the past 25 years (Le Linh Chi, 2025). They have emerged as influential policy-makers, astute public managers, and leading entrepreneurs who directly integrate modern, transparent governance capabilities and critical thinking into the administration of the country's socio-economic apparatus. The explicit endorsement of FUV by the U.S. government in official joint statements demonstrates that this institution is not merely a university, but an enduring soft-power anchor of American values on Vietnamese soil (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2023).

THE PEACE CORPS: PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE DIPLOMACY AND GRASSROOTS SOFT POWER

While Fulbright University Vietnam (FUV) targets academic elites and macro-level governance frameworks, the presence of the U.S. Peace Corps carries profound symbolic weight for people-to-people diplomacy at the community level. Established in 1961 under President John F. Kennedy with a mission to project American goodwill worldwide through volunteer service, the Peace Corps has operated across dozens of nations. However, in a country that once suffered the devastation of American military conflict, the arrival of U.S. volunteers in high school classrooms represents a monumental act of historical reconciliation. Overcoming security concerns and ideological barriers required nearly six decades of patient negotiation before the bilateral Implementing Agreement was formally signed in 2020 (Vietnam News, 2022).

In October 2022, Vietnam officially became the 143rd nation to welcome its inaugural cohort of Peace Corps volunteers (Vietnam News, 2022). Following an intensive 10-week training program designed to build language proficiency, cultural competence, and pedagogical skills tailored to the Vietnamese educational environment, these volunteers embarked on co-teaching English alongside local educators in high schools across Hanoi, eventually expanding to Ho Chi Minh City (Peace Corps, 2023). The subsequent decision by both governments to extend the agreement for another five years (through 2030) -commemorating the 30th anniversary of normalized diplomatic relations - stands as vivid testament to a deepening and irreversible political trust (U.S. Mission Vietnam, 2025).

This initiative yields a powerful dual impact. From an educational standpoint, qualified native-speaking teachers contribute directly to the goals of the National Foreign Language Project spearheaded by Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training, thereby elevating student competitiveness. More importantly, in terms of cultural diplomacy, these volunteers act as micro-cultural ambassadors. They help dispel entrenched stereotypes about the United States among local populations while building authentic

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friendships and bonds with youth. Concurrently, as these young Americans immerse themselves in Vietnamese culture - engaging in community life and learning local folk traditions - they return home carrying genuine understanding, respect, and affinity for Vietnam, creating a virtuous cycle of mutual empathy (Vietnam News, 2022). This represents the most vivid manifestation of soft power permeating from the societal grassroots.

THE ITSU FUND, ASU, AND THE STRATEGY TO SHAPE THE GLOBAL SEMICONDUCTOR SUPPLY CHAIN

Entering the third decade of the 21st century, global geopolitical competition increasingly centers on dominance over core technologies. In this context, the excessive reliance of American tech corporations on closed semiconductor supply chains in nations with differing political systems poses severe security risks. To mitigate this threat, the United States enacted the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022. A key component of this legislation was the establishment of the International Technology Security and Innovation (ITSI) Fund - allocated \$500 million over five years (2023-2027) under the management of the U.S. Department of State - aimed at building a secure, diverse, and resilient supply chain for telecommunications components and semiconductors free from the control of authoritarian entities (U.S. Department of State, 2026).

Surpassing numerous candidates, Vietnam was highly valued by the United States and selected as one of eight strategic countries (alongside Mexico, Costa Rica, the Philippines, Indonesia, and others) to participate in the fund's flagship network (Office of the Spokesperson, 2023). The convergence of Vietnam's aspiration to ascend the high-tech value chain and the United States' imperative to diversify its supply sources found an ideal alignment through educational cooperation. Under the coordination of the U.S. Department of State, Arizona State University (ASU) - a premier institution in engineering and technology - was awarded a \$13.8 million grant to lead this initiative across partner nations (Office of the Spokesperson, 2024).

In Vietnam, the project strategically avoids an overly broad focus, concentrating instead on the Assembly, Testing, and Packaging (ATP) segment - the backend of the semiconductor chain where Vietnam possesses the most suitable human resource foundation to emerge as a regional hub (Office of the Spokesperson, 2023). Training-of-Trainers (ToT) workshops and curriculum enhancement initiatives have been rolled out extensively at innovation centers in collaboration with the Ministry of Planning and Investment, the Ministry of Information and Communications, and leading technical institutions such as Phenikaa University (Phenikaa University, 2024).

Through ASU's training platform, specialized online micro-credentials meeting U.S. industry standards - covering 2D packaging, material selection, mechanical-thermal modeling, and reliability testing - are provided completely free of charge to Vietnamese faculty and students. By bolstering the Vietnamese government's target of training 50,000 semiconductor engineers, the United States not only strengthens its partner's geoeconomic position but also executes an outstanding act of smart diplomacy: proactively building production capacity within a trusted partner, thereby establishing an interwoven economic security ecosystem bound by deep mutual interest, where supply chain disruptions can be systematically minimized (U.S. Department of State, 2026).

THE YOUNG SOUTHEAST ASIAN LEADERS INITIATIVE (YSEALI): A PLATFORM FOR FUTURE CONNECTIVITY

Alongside traditional state-level and university-institutional cooperation mechanisms, American cultural and educational diplomacy also reaches micro-level changemakers through the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI). Launched personally by President Barack Obama in 2013, this signature network connects youth aged 18 to 35 across 11 Southeast Asian nations, including Timor-Leste (Le Thi Phuong Loan, 2022; Le Van Toan, 2026). Through diverse components such as Professional Fellowships, 5-week Academic Fellowships in the United States, and particularly seed grant programs, YSEALI empowers young leaders to address pressing challenges in environmental protection, social entrepreneurship, community leadership, and civic engagement.

While funded projects span Southeast Asia - ranging from the *Digiverse* project in Brunei and *Labor Plus* protecting labor rights in Cambodia to *Humba SHEpreneur* advancing female entrepreneurship in Indonesia - Vietnamese students and youth leaders consistently rank among the most competitive and actively participating cohorts. Tens of thousands of Vietnamese youth have joined the YSEALI network, making vital contributions to cultural exchange and youth connectivity across Southeast Asia (Ordaniel & Stenek, 2021, p. 4). By directly cultivating an outward-looking leadership community that shares values of democratic governance, social responsibility, and an American-style entrepreneurial mindset, the United States leverages YSEALI as an exceptional long-term soft-power instrument. This ensures that future policymakers, entrepreneurs, and civic leaders in Vietnam and the region maintain deep understanding, close connectivity, and aligned values with U.S. institutions for decades to come.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the historical trajectory of U.S.-Vietnam educational cooperation since the establishment of the Comprehensive Partnership in 2013, educational and training collaboration between the two nations has clearly undergone a transformative metamorphosis - evolving from isolated academic exchanges and war legacy remediation initiatives into a formidable and unshakeable strategic framework. Transcending mere commercial calculations, high-tech security initiatives under the ITSU Fund

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and the robust maturation of Fulbright University Vietnam collectively reflect a deepening alignment of strategic orientation and shared values between the two countries. To fully optimize the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, policymakers from both sides must continue institutionalizing co-funded scholarship programs, fostering deeper engagement from technology corporations, and dismantling technical barriers regarding degree recognition. Investing in human capital and knowledge networks remains the most humane and sustainable path to transcend historical differences, bolster strategic trust, and advance toward shared prosperity.

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