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WAR LEGACY DIPLOMACY AND RECONCILIATION IN VIETNAM-U.S. RELATIONS (2001-PRESENT): FROM TRAUMA TO MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the historic transformative process in Vietnam-U.S. relations, moving from war traumas to strategic mutual understanding, culminating in the establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2023. Utilizing an interdisciplinary framework that integrates soft power, trauma and healing, and reconciliation theories, the study dissects "war legacy diplomacy" as the core mechanism for bilateral trust-building. By analyzing case studies such as the Vietnam Wartime Accounting Initiative (VWAI), unexploded ordnance (UXO) clearance in Quang Tri, and Dioxin remediation projects in Da Nang and Bien Hoa, the paper argues that cooperation in overcoming war legacies goes beyond humanitarian and environmental remediation to carry profound geopolitical weight. These initiatives mark a structural shift from asymmetrical obligations to reciprocal humanitarianism, thereby actualizing Vietnam's bamboo diplomacy and solidifying long-term U.S. commitments. The findings affirm that humanitarian and cultural diplomacy serve as the foundation helping both nations transcend the past, turning war legacies into a catalyst for peace and prosperity.

KEYWORDS: war legacy diplomacy, Vietnam-U.S. relations, soft power, trauma and healing, UXO and Dioxin remediation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Vietnam and the United States embodies a distinctive paradox and serves as an exemplary lesson in modern diplomatic history. Once two nations on opposite sides of the front lines in one of the most devastating conflicts of the Cold War era - a war that left behind colossal consequences in terms of human lives, ecological damage, and deep psychological scars across generations - Vietnam and the United States have today ascended to a new level of integration, mutual trust, and interdependence. On September 10, 2023, the historic visit of U.S. President Joe Biden to Hanoi, at the invitation of General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, marked a milestone, upgrading bilateral relations to a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Peace, Cooperation, and Sustainable Development.' This event was not a sudden leap in a political vacuum, but rather the culmination of a long and relentless process, in which 'war legacy diplomacy' has acted as the cornerstone for trust-building.

The transition from former adversaries to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership requires far more than mere trade agreements or pragmatic geopolitical calculations; it demands a profound cognitive and cultural transformation. From tentative initial steps in joint accounting for American personnel Missing in Action (MIA) in the 1980s to large-scale dioxin remediation, unexploded ordnance (UXO) clearance, and most recently, official U.S. support in locating hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese fallen soldiers through the Vietnam Wartime Accounting Initiative (VWAI) (Anh, 2026), the two nations have converted war legacy remediation into a shared vocabulary of mutual understanding. This study aims to dissect the structural dynamics of this reconciliation process through a specialized International Relations lens. Moving beyond financial aid metrics or hectares of remediated land, it seeks to unpack the psycho-political mechanisms driving this historic acculturation.

The research centers on core questions: How can severe intergenerational trauma be transmuted into a catalyst for empathy? How has the interplay of defense-technical efforts by the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), development initiatives by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and people-to-people diplomacy by non-governmental organizations shaped each nation's soft power? Anchored in international relations and cultural diplomacy, this study offers a holistic, multidimensional portrait of a relationship that serves as a paradigm for modern reconciliation, while affirming the role of heritage diplomacy as a strategic bedrock for fostering trust and shaping foreign policy in a turbulent global landscape.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

U.S.–Vietnam relations and the lingering consequences of the Vietnam War represent one of the most extensively analyzed topics within both international and Vietnamese scholarship. However, the analytical lenses and research paradigms applied to this subject have shifted noticeably over the decades, reflecting the maturation of foreign policy in both nations. During the initial post-normalization phase (1995–2010), academic research and policy reports focused primarily on political and legal hurdles as well as economic integration, exemplified by negotiations for the 2000 Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) and Vietnam's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2007. In this period, war legacy issues were often viewed through the lens of imposed "prerequisites" from the United States. Scholars at the time chiefly analyzed how the U.S. leveraged the POW/MIA (Prisoners of War / Missing in Action) issue as political leverage to compel Vietnamese cooperation, while U.S. aid to Vietnam remained strictly constrained by the lingering effects of the Cold War (Le Dinh Tinh, 2020).

Beginning in the second decade of the twenty-first century, research trends underwent a pronounced shift toward humanitarian perspectives, trust-building, and cultural diplomacy. Scholars and strategic think tanks—such as the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and researchers at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV)—began to view war legacy remediation as an indispensable "catalyst" for constructing strategic trust. Environmental impact assessment reports by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)

and the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) regarding remediation progress at Da Nang and Bien Hoa airbases provided crucial quantitative evidence of efforts to translate political commitments into action (Le Dinh Tinh, 2020). Concurrently, within International Relations theory in Vietnam, concepts such as "niche diplomacy" and "cultural diplomacy" were defined and analyzed with greater clarity. According to experts from the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, for a middle power, diplomacy extends beyond formal bilateral treaties to encompass the involvement of non-state actors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academia, and individuals aimed at addressing historical trauma through specialized yet highly impactful domains. These studies demonstrate that proactively positioning cultural diplomacy as one of the three pillars of foreign relations has allowed Vietnam to deploy humanistic values, tolerance, and a desire for peace as powerful instruments to project soft power internationally (Vu Le Thai Hoang, 2020).

At a deeper, sub-theoretical level spanning literary theory and social psychology, recent studies on "trauma and healing" in literature and civic life have shed light on the obscure dimensions of war aftermaths. Analyses of literature and the arts—such as scholarly critiques of *The Sorrow of War* or contemporary novels exploring the plight of post-war Southern women—indicate that war trauma is not restricted to physical disabilities caused by unexploded ordnance or Agent Orange, but also encompasses intergenerational trauma concealed within family and social structures. Healing, therefore, does not entail erasing memory or denying trauma; rather, it involves confronting trauma and restructuring the meaning of memory to cultivate resilience and a new, forward-looking value system (Nguyen Bui Thien Nhan & Bui Thanh Truyen, 2024).

Building upon these academic lineages, this study offers a groundbreaking integrated approach: combining large-scale empirical data from war legacy remediation projects (conducted by DPAA, VNOSMP, and USAID) with theories of cultural diplomacy and the psychology of healing to explain the underlying architecture of strategic reconciliation.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To decode the multidimensional and highly complex acculturation process in U.S.–Vietnam relations, this study employs three primary theoretical pillars to construct a cohesive analytical framework: Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy, Trauma and Healing Theory, and Reconciliation Theory in International Relations.

1. Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy Theory

The concept of "Soft Power," pioneered by political scientist Joseph Nye, emphasizes a state's ability to shape the preferences and behaviors of other nations through the appeal of its culture, political ideals, and ethical foreign policies, rather than relying on military or economic coercion. In the U.S.–Vietnam context, soft power resides not merely in America's immense financial strength or Vietnam's millennia-old cultural heritage; rather, it is continuously constructed and transmuted through Cultural Diplomacy. While traditional diplomacy regards the state as the sole actor, modern cultural diplomacy broadens its scope to include academia, businesses, non-governmental organizations, and individuals.

Within cultural diplomacy, every citizen - from an American veteran returning to clear unexploded ordnance to a Vietnamese international student in the United States - can serve as an ambassador. The United States has adeptly utilized cultural diplomacy through initiatives such as Peace Corps English education projects or Fulbright scholar exchanges to gradually blur the image of a former imperial adversary, replacing it with that of a modern, benevolent development partner (Peace Corps Viet Nam, 2024). Conversely, Vietnam projects the image of a resilient, magnanimous nation prepared to "set aside the past and look to the future" in order to garner respect, compassion, and robust support from the international community (Ordaniel & Stenek, 2021). Through cultural diplomacy, ideological differences are obscured, making way for universal human values.

2. Trauma and Healing Theory

Post-traumatic stress theory in the post-war context posits that when a community or nation experiences colossal human, ecological, and socio-structural losses, the resulting trauma does not evaporate with the signing of a peace treaty, but rather morphs into a collective identity. Victims of landmines and children born with congenital defects caused by Agent Orange bear not only personal suffering but the "trauma of a nation" (Nguyen Bui Thien Nhan & Bui Thanh Truyen, 2024).

Within the paradigms of psychology and cultural studies, the concept of "healing" is by no means synonymous with pretending the trauma never existed, nor does it imply employing psychological placebos to erase history. Healing is a natural mechanism of resistance against trauma, achieved by confronting reality, acknowledging root causes, and re-establishing a new continuum of meaning for life. Applied to U.S.-Vietnam relations, the U.S. government's official acknowledgment and allocation of hundreds of millions of dollars for Agent Orange and unexploded ordnance remediation constitute an imperative stepping stone to soothe the collective grievance of the Vietnamese people, who previously felt ignored and abandoned by Washington's evasion of responsibility in the early post-war decades (Searcy, 2021). Direct U.S. involvement in remediation efforts transcends physical environmental cleanup; it is an act of national "healing" that affords victims a sense of dignity and justice.

3. Reconciliation Theory in International Relations

In the international arena, reconciliation between two states that have endured total war necessitates more than technical armistice agreements. Political theorists delineate the reconciliation process into four sequential stages: (i) Cessation of hostilities: Establishing normal diplomatic relations based on mutual recognition (the 1995 milestone for Vietnam and the U.S.); (ii) Institutional cooperation: Building economic, trade, and legal frameworks (the signing of the BTA in 2000); (iii) Moral and historical reconstruction: Jointly addressing the dark legacies of war and alleviating community suffering (Dioxin remediation, MIA/POW accounting, UXO clearance); and (iv) Security community and shared vision: Achieving a profound level of strategic trust for security and defense cooperation, and jointly responding to geopolitical challenges (the establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2023).

The critically important transition from stage 2 to stage 4 for Vietnam and the United States hinges entirely upon the success of stage 3—namely, war legacy diplomacy. Absent the efforts to clean up Bien Hoa or locate the remains of fallen soldiers, any endeavor in defense cooperation in the South China Sea or semiconductor partnerships would consistently encounter profound skepticism and resistance from deep within the socio-political spheres of both nations.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative methodology combined with historical analysis, anchored in the Constructivist paradigm (Constructivism) within International Relations. According to this framework, political reality is shaped not solely by material capabilities, but also by norms, identities, and ideational interactions between states.

(i) Document Analysis: The research reviews a substantial corpus of legal texts, Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs), bilateral agreements, and, notably, field reports from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA), and the Vietnam Office for Seeking Missing Persons (VNOSMP) (Phan Xuan Dung, 2025). Data regarding budget disbursements, remediated land areas, and the repatriation of remains are extracted to serve as quantitative evidence.

(ii) Case Study: The study focuses on dissecting highly symbolic projects to elucidate their underlying dynamics. These include the Dioxin remediation projects at Da Nang and Bien Hoa airbases, and the unexploded ordnance (UXO) clearance model associated with the Vietnam Wartime Accounting Initiative (VWAI).

(iii) Interdisciplinary Approach: Techno-economic data is evaluated through the vocabularies of cultural diplomacy, political science, and social psychology to extract deeper layers of meaning (second- and third-order insights). This approach ensures that the report transcends a mere compilation of isolated events to form an organic analytical structure, thoroughly explaining the causal relationship between the clearance of a single landmine and the enhancement of strategic trust.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. MIA and VWAI: Reversing the Paradigm from "Historical Debt" to "Reciprocal Humanitarianism"

In the history of modern international relations, rarely has an issue become such a persistent prerequisite and political obsession for the normalization of relations as the issue of American Prisoners of War and Missing in Action (POW/MIA) in Vietnam. Since 1985, when the Vietnamese government initiated unilateral efforts to repatriate the remains of American personnel, followed by the formalization of Joint Field Activities (JFAs) between the U.S. Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) and the Vietnam Office for Seeking Missing Persons (VNOSMP), thousands of military and civilian personnel from both nations have waded through mud and excavated in the most remote, rugged terrains (U.S. Mission Vietnam, 2025b).

The DPAA has continuously mounted large-scale operations despite topographical challenges and global pandemics. For instance, even during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fiscal Year 2021), the DPAA overcame international travel restrictions to conduct underwater recovery operations (such as in the waters of Nha Trang, Khanh Hoa) and terrestrial missions. During the 161st JFA (late 2023), even as the U.S. government faced a looming shutdown and joint U.S. support teams could not deploy, Vietnam's Unilateral Recovery Teams proactively surveyed and recovered remains associated with an F-105 pilot whose aircraft crashed in Yen Bai, culminating in a deeply moving 171st repatriation ceremony in Hanoi. To date, this resilient effort has facilitated the identification and repatriation of over 1,067 missing American personnel from the Vietnam War era, alleviating the anguish of thousands of American families (U.S. Mission Vietnam, 2025b).

For decades, however, the structure of this cooperation was distinctly asymmetrical: the United States demanded aggressively, and Vietnam complied on humanitarian grounds in exchange for the lifting of the trade embargo and diplomatic normalization. This asymmetry left a bitter aftertaste for many Vietnamese, given that the S-shaped nation itself still had approximately 300,000 unidentified fallen soldiers whose remains had yet to be recovered, leaving hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese families agonizing day and night over the resting places of their ancestors (Sisk, 2023).

A "history-making" turning point that fundamentally shifted this cooperative paradigm occurred in 2021 with the establishment of the Vietnam Wartime Accounting Initiative (VWAI) (Tran Thi Bich, 2023, p. 140). Stemming from an official Vietnamese request in 2018, this project is coordinated by the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) and USAID, in partnership with the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Texas Tech University, and Harvard University. Under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed in July 2020 and subsequently operationalized, the United States reframed the MIA issue from one prioritizing American citizens to a shared, reciprocal humanitarian concern. USAID has not only provided funding (an initial \$2.4 million) but also committed to equipping a state-of-the-art DNA analysis laboratory in Vietnam by 2025. Furthermore, the VWAI has granted access to a massive repository of approximately 260,000 captured wartime artifacts - equivalent to 2.6 million pages of military documents - to help Vietnamese agencies decode military acronyms, locate mass graves, and identify fallen soldiers. The "Unseen Legacies" working group has continuously organized direct professional exchanges and training courses with Vietnamese forensic experts, transitioning the process from isolated individual identifications to the development of a comprehensive identification system for the Vietnamese government (Sisk, 2023).

This shift in focus within the VWAI carries immense significance in terms of collective psychology and strategic diplomacy. First, it represents a public, official, and action-oriented U.S. acknowledgment of the colossal grief and loss experienced by the Vietnamese people, shattering the "Americentric trauma" bias in the memory of the war. When the U.S. assists Vietnam in searching for 300,000 of its own fallen heroes regardless of political ideology, the historical asymmetry is bridged, transforming a political obligation into genuine human empathy. Second, the involvement of American veterans returning personal items, diaries, and battlefield sketches to the families of Vietnamese martyrs has generated profound emotional impacts. It softens the stances of even the most conservative

factions in both societies, demonstrating to the Vietnamese public the authentic goodwill of a former adversary (Sisk, 2023). Third, cooperation in highly sensitive domains - such as sharing wartime intelligence, military forensics, and DNA analysis - has established regular, trusted channels of communication between the generals and defense officials of both nations. The mutual understanding forged through the recovery of remains deep in the mud has laid a solid foundation for substantive defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region today (Ordaniel & Stenek, 2021).

2. Addressing Physical and Environmental Legacies: The Journey from Ground Clearance to Remediating Ecological "Hotspots"

If the search for remains serves as the bridge that unlocks mutual trust, then the remediation of unexploded ordnance (UXO) and Agent Orange/Dioxin constitutes the frontline where the United States must demonstrate its moral responsibility through persistence and massive material resources.

2.1. UXO Clearance: The Quang Tri Model and the Reclamation of Vital Living Spaces

According to the Engineering Command (Bộ Tư lệnh Công binh), the volume of bombs and munitions deployed by the U.S. military during the Vietnam War amounted to approximately 15.35 million tons, of which 7.85 million tons were dropped from aircraft and 7.5 million tons were utilized on the ground (Le Huu Viet, 2017). Estimates indicate that this tonnage is several times greater than the total amount of ordnance the U.S. expended in World War II (1939–1945) and over ten times that of the Korean War (1950–1953) (The Politburo's Steering Committee for the Summary of the War, 2000). Quang Tri province, the most fiercely contested battleground along the 17th parallel, ranks among the most heavily contaminated regions globally, with an estimated 81% of its natural land area affected by UXO. These invisible remnants transformed fertile fields into "death traps," claiming the lives of over 3,430 individuals and injuring 5,100 innocent civilians in peacetime in this province alone (Black, 2015).

Following the lifting of the embargo, the U.S. has incrementally increased its funding since 1994, becoming the largest financial backer for mine action programs in Vietnam, contributing between \$155 million and \$250 million through the State Department and USAID channels (U.S. Mission Vietnam, 2025a). The U.S. does not execute these operations directly but delegates them to international non-governmental organizations and veteran-led initiatives. Prominent examples include Project RENEW (co-founded in 2001 by American veteran Chuck Searcy and his Vietnamese partner Hoang Nam), Peace Trees Vietnam, MAG (Mines Advisory Group), and NPA (Norwegian People's Aid). These organizations have deployed integrated operations anchored on three pillars: technical survey and clearance, Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE), and victim assistance for reintegration (Williams, 2026, p. 15).

The seamless coordination between international funding sources - particularly from the U.S. Department of State's Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement (PM/WRA) - and the close supervision of local authorities has yielded remarkable outcomes. Through sustained campaigns, millions of square meters of land have been cleared, and thousands of bombs have been safely detonated. In 2019, for the first time in post-war history, Quang Tri province recorded a "Zero-Accident" year regarding UXO - a resplendent milestone validating the efficacy of this community-

based approach (Williams, 2026, p. 15). The success of the Quang Tri model is now being vigorously replicated in Quang Binh and other central provinces, bolstered by millions of dollars in new funding (Nguyen, 2020).

It can be posited that sustained U.S. funding, which enables clearance teams to operate continuously, carries implications far beyond mere physical safety. The return of arable land liberates productive forces, stimulating agricultural economic development and infrastructure expansion for one of Vietnam's most impoverished rural regions (Nguyen, 2020). Furthermore, from a diplomatic standpoint, the imagery of modern U.S.-funded mine detectors and American veterans returning to "build upon the ashes and blood of the war" (Black, 2015) has evolved into a potent symbol of people-to-people diplomacy. The laughter during risk-education sessions at local schools, or the collaboration between civilians reporting ordnance via hotlines and the clearance teams, has directly faded the memories of animosity, replacing them with a shared consciousness of co-creating peace (Nguyen, 2021).

2.2. The Dioxin Remediation Campaign: When Strategic Trust is Measured in Funding and Technology

If unexploded ordnance represents a tangible peril, Agent Orange constitutes the most invisible, persistent, and haunting wound of the Vietnam War. During Operation Ranch Hand (1961-1971), the U.S. military sprayed 80 million litres of chemical defoliants, 61% of which was Agent Orange, equivalent to nearly 370 kilograms of dioxin (Le Dinh Tinh, 2020, p. 2; Minh Hue, 2021). The ensuing legacy is catastrophic: millions of people were exposed, hundreds of thousands died, and the repercussions of congenital defects and hereditary paralysis have spanned three to four generations, trapping numerous families in inescapable tragedies. The United States spent up to 15 years in bitter internal debates just to begin assisting its own poisoned veterans, and persuading Washington officials to acknowledge legal and moral responsibility toward Vietnamese civilian victims was exponentially more arduous (Le Dinh Tinh, 2020).

However, through the relentless lobbying efforts of conscientious politicians - most notably Senator Patrick Leahy - the Leahy War Victims Fund was established in 1989. This initiative paved the way for direct assistance to persons with disabilities in Vietnam by providing wheelchairs, prosthetics, and rehabilitation services (Phan Xuan Dung, 2025).

The true breakthrough in environmental diplomacy only materialized when both governments decided to target the source of the toxicity directly: former airbases where the chemicals were stored and loaded, which had become ecological "hotspots" posing subterranean threats. Two mega-projects for Dioxin remediation, coordinated by USAID and the Vietnamese Ministry of National Defense (MND), were established (Le Dinh Tinh, 2020):

(1) The Environmental Remediation of Dioxin Contamination at Da Nang Airport Project was implemented from 2012 to 2018, with a total budget of \$110 million funded by the U.S. government through USAID (Luu, 2018). By successfully applying In-Pile Thermal Desorption (IPTD) technology (high-temperature heating combined with vacuum extraction), the project comprehensively treated

90,000 cubic meters of contaminated soil and sediment. As a result, over 30 hectares of clean land were fully liberated and handed back to Vietnam, not only facilitating the Ministry of Transport's expansion of the commercial airport but also contributing significantly to hosting the 2017 APEC Economic Leaders' Week. Transcending its environmental and public health implications, the Da Nang project became the first successful model and a historic watershed in U.S.–Vietnam relations: transforming a war legacy that was once the most sensitive issue into a symbol of reconciliation, cooperation, and the construction of strategic trust between former adversaries.

(2) The Dioxin Remediation at Bien Hoa Airbase Area Project was officially launched in 2019 and is slated for completion before 2030. The total estimated cost of the project ranges from \$390 million to \$450 million (Thien, 2025), of which USAID has committed \$183 million for the initial phase (Le, 2019). This constitutes the largest remaining dioxin hotspot in Vietnam, encompassing approximately 500,000 cubic meters of contaminated soil and sediment - four times the scale of the preceding Da Nang airport project. Technically, the project employs a combination of modern methods, including safe containment and high-temperature treatment technology (thermal desorption), to excavate and clean hundreds of thousands of cubic meters of soil. The implementation of this project aims not only to eliminate the risk of toxic leakage, avert ecological disasters threatening groundwater sources, and protect public health, but it also carries profound geopolitical significance. This endeavor attests to the long-term, cross-administration commitment of the United States to jointly resolve war legacies, thereby establishing war legacy cooperation as the bedrock for consolidating strategic trust and deepening the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

Overall, the dioxin remediation projects are not merely environmental contracts; they carry unparalleled geopolitical weight. The direct, profound cooperation between the Vietnamese military and a U.S. civilian agency (USAID) as well as the U.S. Department of Defense - situated squarely within strategic airbases (Da Nang, Bien Hoa) - is entirely unprecedented. Conventionally, military bases are strictly off-limits to foreign presence. Therefore, this collaboration has dismantled highly sensitive security barriers, evidencing an extraordinarily deep level of strategic trust between the two sides.

Furthermore, U.S. steadfastness regarding the Bien Hoa project has demonstrated the durability of bipartisan consensus in Washington. Although there were periods when aid flows were temporarily stalled during the Donald Trump administration (provoking profound concern from Vietnam regarding U.S. commitment), robust support from lawmakers such as Senator Patrick Leahy and other partners ensured that budgets were rapidly restored and legislative stability was maintained. The U.S. willingness to pour hundreds of millions of dollars into a decade-long project proves that Washington views healing the wounds of war in Vietnam as a "mandatory investment" to secure its standing in the Indo-Pacific.

Overcoming war legacies is the foundation of "Strategic Trust" in international relations. In U.S.–Vietnam relations, the principle of "setting aside the past, overcoming differences, building on similarities, and looking to the future" has consistently been upheld. The direct U.S. involvement (alongside Vietnam) in remediating dioxin "hotspots" such as Da Nang, A Luoi, and now Bien Hoa

illustrates a transition from "evasion" to "proactive acceptance of responsibility and legacy resolution." This cooperation plays a decisive role, paving the way for historic diplomatic elevations - most notably the 2023 Joint Statement upgrading relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for peace, cooperation, and sustainable development.

VI. CONCLUSION

The U.S.–Vietnam relationship, from its tentative early days in the 21st century to its current phase of explosive growth, serves as the most incisive empirical validation of a core thesis: History, no matter how dark and tragic, can become an invaluable asset if nations possess the political wisdom, courage, and magnanimity to transform it into an instrument for peacebuilding.

The transformative journey from "trauma" to "understanding" did not unfold mechanistically, nor was it achieved through hollow diplomatic apologies. It was forged through the sweat shed over every square meter of dioxin-contaminated soil thermally treated at Da Nang and Bien Hoa; through the valor required to neutralize each landmine in the fields of Quang Tri; and through the DNA diagnostics used to identify unknown Vietnamese fallen heroes with U.S. technological assistance. All these fragments coalesced to generate a unique form of "Soft Power" that has permeated the collective consciousness of both nations, fundamentally reshaping the identity of the bilateral relationship.

From the perspective of International Relations theory, "war legacy diplomacy" has demonstrated an exceptional trailblazing role. It thoroughly fulfills the imperatives of Vietnam's "Bamboo Diplomacy" philosophy: steadfastly maintaining the principles of independence and sovereignty, while exhibiting immense flexibility in attracting massive resources from superpowers to rebuild the nation and establish a secure geopolitical counterbalance. The powerful impetus derived from war legacy remediation created the momentum that propelled bilateral trade volume from a mere half-billion USD in 1995 to nearly \$124 billion in 2023 (Manyin & Wong, 2024), and it is currently driving robust cooperation in the era of semiconductors and innovation.

Ultimately, the journey from the shadows of war into the light of cooperation and shared prosperity between Vietnam and the United States stands as the clearest testament to this truth: when humanitarian diplomacy, cultural exchange, and empathy are positioned as policy bedrocks, even the most profound traumas in human history can be healed, transforming a brutal yesterday into a launchpad for a brighter tomorrow.

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