



Australia Vietnam  
Policy Institute



May 2024

# Australia Vietnam Policy Institute (AVPI) Darwin Roundtable Summary Paper

**What a Comprehensive Strategic  
Partnership between Australia and Vietnam  
Could Achieve: Enhancing Trade and  
Investment in Agriculture and Resources**



**NORTHERN  
TERRITORY  
GOVERNMENT**



Australian Government  
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

**The Australia Vietnam Policy Institute (AVPI) Darwin Roundtable on 20 February 2024 was hosted in collaboration with the Northern Territory Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade, as part of the AVPI's second roundtable series.**

The discussion continued its focus on the future potential of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) between Australia and Vietnam, following announcements from both Governments during the 50th anniversary year of diplomatic relations in 2023 of the intention to elevate the strategic partnership to the highest level.<sup>1</sup> Co-facilitated by Camilla Philip, Director of Trade Strategy at the Northern Territory Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade, and Dominique Wiehahn, AVPI Lead and Associate Director of Asia Strategy and Impact at RMIT University, the roundtable brought together 14 participants from education, government, and industry to discuss the future potential of a CSP and the role of a coordinated industry and government approach in enhancing connections between Australia and Vietnam.

Roundtable participants shared valuable perspectives on bridging geographical divides through delegations, enhancing business preparedness for international markets, and fostering workforce development through strategic cultural exchanges.

This summary paper highlights the experiences and priorities of the roundtable participants and the agriculture and resources sectors in the Northern Territory. The key themes and emerging insights from the discussion are presented here to provide industry input into the ways a CSP can support greater two-way trade and investment.

**Australia Vietnam Enhanced Economic Engagement Grant (AVEG) Round 2 Roundtable Series.**

AVPI roundtables in 2023/2024 are being completed under the second iteration of the AVEG Program, supported by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

Building on the successful Australia-Vietnam Business Champions roundtable series in 2022, the second AVPI roundtable series is exploring new Australia and Vietnam locations and key sectors, as identified in the Australia Vietnam Enhanced Economic Engagement Strategy (EEES). These engagements aim to build a strong national voice on the challenges and opportunities across sectors that are key to both countries' economic development and sustainable futures.

**Australia Vietnam Policy Institute (AVPI)**

The AVPI is the first policy institute focused on Australia's relationship with Vietnam, acting as a partnered public policy hub centred around engagement, collaboration, and impact. The AVPI enables and facilitates discussions on strategic and economic issues in the Australia-Vietnam bilateral relationship. Through disseminating the latest research, identifying upcoming trends, and sharing practical insights from people with on-the-ground experience, the AVPI helps to advance a cooperative and secure environment for two-way trade and investment.

1. This discussion took place prior to the announcement of the Governments of Australia and Vietnam elevating the relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership on 7 March 2024. The contents of this paper reflect the anticipation of the CSP to ensure accurate representation of the discussion.

## Key Takeaways



1. For inbound trade delegations, the discussion highlighted the necessity of transcending the 'Berrimah Line', advocating for an immersive experience in the breadth of what the Northern Territory offers and the logistical realities attached to its vastness.
2. A shift from formal reception to substantial business matching is welcomed for outbound trade delegations. Establishing a foundational relationship online before in-country meetings could enhance trust and facilitate deeper commercial partnerships between Australian and Vietnamese enterprises. This requires a longer lead time for Australian organisations and governments to prepare and ensure the right people are on the ground.
3. The Northern Territory's rapid growth and development have illuminated a pressing need for a skilled and semi-skilled workforce, particularly within its regional areas. By tapping into Vietnam's trained labour, specialists in tropical agriculture, feedlot operations, and aquaculture, the Territory can overcome the twin challenges of attraction and retention of talent.
4. Intentionally strengthening and revitalising the Vietnamese diaspora community in the Northern Territory is the first step to driving business and community cohesion within the Territory and providing relational inroads to increased trade and investment into Vietnam. This could be initiated by establishing a Territory-based chapter of the Australia-Vietnam Business Council.
5. There is a gap in market intelligence regarding Vietnam, stressing the need for a guide to inform investment and trade decisions. Conversely, an equivalent may be beneficial in Vietnam, particularly in offering a way to navigate complex regulatory requirements for particular sectors.



# The Northern Territory is deepening its partnership with Vietnam, underscored by a recently signed 5-year plan with Khanh Hoa Province aimed at bolstering bilateral ties.

The collaboration spans several sectors: trade, agribusiness, the blue economy, education, tourism, arts, and culture. Khanh Hoa's rapid economic ascent aligns with Vietnam's national objectives, positioning it as a critical player for the Northern Territory.<sup>2</sup>

Vietnam is recognised as a critical focus within the Northern Territory's International Engagement Strategy 2022-26 and is noted as a high-priority market for international engagement and trade. Shared climatic conditions offer fertile ground for agricultural and aquaculture exchanges, promising opportunities for local businesses and educational institutions.<sup>3</sup>

The discussion from the AVPI roundtable in Darwin converged on some common themes: bridging geographical divides through delegations, enhancing business preparedness for international markets, and fostering workforce development through strategic cultural exchanges. This roundtable stressed the importance of comprehensive engagement – beyond the immediacy of commercial transactions – to establish enduring partnerships. The following sections distil these insights, presenting participants' views of the Northern Territory's approach to investment, its emerging sectors of focus, and its commitment to creating mutually beneficial opportunities with international partners.

2. Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade, Northern Territory Government, "Reinvigorating trade and investment with Vietnam", accessed 12 March 2024, <https://industry.nt.gov.au/publications/business/publications/business-bulletins/july-to-september-2023/business-bulletin-10-august-2023>.
3. Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade, "International Engagement Strategy 2022-2026", Northern Territory Government, (2021).



# Delegations: Bridging the distance

## Passing the 'Berrimah Line'

The 'Berrimah Line' represents a notional boundary within the Northern Territory, separating the Darwin metropolis from communities situated south of Darwin's southern suburb, Berrimah.<sup>4</sup> It symbolises a perceived disparity in attention and resources, with the belief that policy-making predominantly favours the urban northern precincts, potentially neglecting the expansive rural and remote areas beyond.

Delegates advocating for deeper bilateral engagement between Australia and Vietnam emphasise the imperative of crossing this line – literally and figuratively. Firsthand experiences of the Northern Territory's sectors, such as cotton and cattle, are vital to transforming Vietnam's understanding of the Territory's industrial capabilities and scale, encouraging a revaluation of investment and collaboration opportunities.<sup>5</sup> In this season alone, over 15,000 hectares of cotton will be planted.<sup>6</sup> With the recent opening of the Katherine cotton gin, it is expected that over 200,000 bales can now be processed in the Territory (as opposed to Queensland).<sup>7</sup>

Participants highlighted that, in their experience, Vietnamese firms have been known to harbour reservations and pull out of deals, often when faced with complex and unexpected foreign regulatory frameworks and logistical realities, and the associated costs.

It was acknowledged that the lengthy journeys can test the patience of our visiting delegations. Yet, it must be showcased to truly convey the Territory's value. The real beauty of the Territory unfolds in its landscapes. Moreover, grasping inherent challenges crystallises an understanding of the costs involved and the opportunities available.

When delegations showcase the port's efficiency with thousands of cattle being processed, it can mask the reality of the strenuous 1,500-kilometre journey from the cattle stations. Going deeper into the Territory enables a more comprehensive narrative that includes the economic journey.

*“When we do reciprocal trade, the delegate comes back. We have to go past the 'Berrimah line', and that's expensive. It's long days in cars... but bringing people to Darwin to talk about cattle, it's a very small fraction of the story.”*

– Roundtable Participant<sup>8</sup>

4. ABC News, “The Invisible border separating the haves and have notes”, accessed 12 March 2024, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-29/berrimah-line-invisible-money-border-separating-haves-have-nots/9800858>.
5. Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade, “Budget 2023-2024 Industry Outlook”, Northern Territory Government, (2022).
6. ABC News, “Northern Territory's first cotton gin opens as growers start planting 15,000ha crop”, accessed 12 March 2024, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-12-15/northern-territory-first-cotton-gin-opens-katherine-70m/103230508>.
7. Cotton Australia, “Katherine Cotton Gin opening marks a milestone for Northern Territory agriculture”, accessed 12 March 2024, <https://cottonaustralia.com.au/news/katherine-cotton-gin-opening-marks-a-milestone-for-northern-territory-agriculture>.
8. Industry participant in the Australia-Vietnam Darwin roundtable, 20 February 2024.

## Form over formalities

Northern Territory businesses advocate for a renewed approach to international engagement – where readiness and targeted engagement are prioritised over formalities. While there was recognition that government-endorsed or official ministerial-led delegations had far greater gravitas in-country, participants believed that the compressed timelines often associated with these delegations led to formalities over form.

It is crucial to consider a lead time before engaging in delegations. One participant highlighted the importance of ensuring that both the producer and exporter can be present so that if an investor wants to purchase cattle, the deal can be made then and there.

*“We may send three producers across, but we’re missing a critical link there.*

*Producers don’t actually sell cattle. We supply exporters. So, if you’ve got producers going, you need to ask them, ‘who is your exporter that you sell cattle to? Are they able to come with us?’*

*If you are in one of these meetings and they [investors] say, ‘we love your cattle, can we buy 4,000?’, if the exporters don’t come, you can’t turn to your exporter and say, ‘can you do this?’*

– Roundtable Participant<sup>9</sup>

In the digital age, the value of connection before actual meetings cannot be overstressed. Establishing rapport before face-to-face meetings is an effective way to solidify relationships before delegations. Preliminary online discussions can provide information for effective business matching and cultivate trust that lays the groundwork for more productive and strategic subsequent interactions.

Participants emphasised that strategic, targeted business matching should be central to any delegation’s preparation process. Time invested in this phase is essential for cultivating relationships that will bear fruit when the parties meet on the ground in Vietnam. This practice serves to ‘convince people there is an opportunity worth taking the risk for’, particularly concerning the high-risk or high perceived risk of doing business in and with Vietnam.<sup>10</sup>



9. Industry participant in the Australia–Vietnam Darwin roundtable, 20 February 2024.

10. TechSci Research, “Vietnam Aquaculture Market”, accessed 12 March 2024, <https://www.techsciresearch.com/report/vietnam-aquaculture-market/8177.html>.

# Workforce training and exchange

Efforts to leverage Vietnam's skilled and semi-skilled workforce could address the Northern Territory's challenges in attracting and retaining talent in regional areas.

In the discussion, there was a specific interest in the practical skills Vietnamese workers bring to cattle feedlotting and crop farming – areas ripe for growth in the Northern Territory. For example, by tapping into Vietnam's established practices in tropical feedlots, the Territory could accelerate its learning curve and implement effective agricultural techniques.

Also raised in previous roundtables, educational exchanges and vocational training initiatives also play a critical role in enhancing the cultural literacy of the workforce. These programs transfer knowledge and facilitate a mutual understanding of work practices and cultural nuances, which is invaluable for businesses operating across borders.

This sector-specific workforce development, underpinned by cultural exchange, takes a long-term view to a reciprocal partnership that links economic needs and workforce demands alongside a recognition that Vietnam has experience and expertise that is beneficial in Australia. Participants also touched on the aquaculture sector and what the Territory could learn from Vietnam's advanced practices.<sup>11</sup>

*“We have provided significant amounts of training and education in Vietnam over the years, but they have far surpassed us in terms of our knowledge and capability in the North. Being able to tap into some of that workforce that has significant experience in feeding cattle and tropical bodies, far more than we can give in the Top End, there's real utility and value for us in our reciprocal relationship”*

– Roundtable Participant<sup>12</sup>



11. Industry participant in the Australia-Vietnam Darwin roundtable, 20 February 2024.

12. Industry participant in the Australia-Vietnam Darwin roundtable, 20 February 2024.



# Revitalising business connections

## Government coordination

The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) holds substantial promise; however, there is a pressing need for a detailed Territory strategy that gives the business sector confidence to invest in forging partnerships and commercial opportunities. Participants reflected that they require a sense of assurance and backing from the government and respective departments to confidently present their initiatives. This approach should encompass Southeast Asia at large and pinpoint specific countries that align with their business objectives and aspirations.

A concerted cross-sectoral effort that encompasses DFAT, local councils, Austrade, and the broader industry, led by the guidance of the Northern Territory Government, is indicative of a collective ambition to foster a dynamic and cohesive business engagement with Vietnam. This cooperative strategy could not only streamline processes but also magnify the influence of each involved sector, guaranteeing a unified and robust representation of the Northern Territory's commercial interests in Vietnam.

## Engaging the diaspora

Business culture and unique community dynamics are fundamental to Australia's relationship with Vietnam. The business environment across Asian countries is markedly different, and Vietnamese investors arriving in the Northern Territory face the challenge of integrating into a new, albeit different, business community.

Roundtable participants believed there was untapped potential to foster closer ties with Vietnam from within the Northern Territory's diverse business landscape. The discussion brought forth the necessity of nurturing a supportive Vietnamese community in the Territory – as a hub where investors can come and feel connected, supported, and part of a cohesive network. A reinvigorated Territory chapter of an Australia-Vietnam Business Council could serve as a first step for this endeavour, offering a structured platform for Vietnamese investors and local businesses to engage and collaborate.

*“It's about engaging with local Vietnamese people. I think having that business council here, structured properly and operating, would be a benefit for all.”*

– Roundtable Participant<sup>13</sup>

Reflecting on the current scenario, where the local Vietnamese community appears fragmented, participants felt that reactivating the business council or establishing a similar entity could address the observed disjunctions and build a stronger, more united Vietnamese presence in the Northern Territory. It was acknowledged that this was not solely the role of government or industry – but needed to be driven by both sectors.

13. Industry participant in the Australia-Vietnam Darwin roundtable, 20 February 2024.



# Current market intelligence

Accurate and accessible market research is critical for Northern Territory businesses considering expansion into Vietnamese markets. Participants felt that data is often neither current nor detailed enough for companies to navigate the complex landscape of international trade and investment confidently. Accessible data can distinguish between seizing an opportunity and hesitating in the face of potential risk.

Understanding the regulatory environment, debunking red tape myths, and providing case studies are essential in preparing businesses for the realities of engaging with Vietnam.

The role of market intelligence was underscored by an anecdote shared by a participant that failure to attract investment into specific sectors was ultimately attributed to a lack of clarity provided by consultants and a misconception of the complexities involved

in adhering to regulatory processes. Agents and consultants eager to secure deals may often fail to communicate the realities of doing business in the Northern Territory – the time-consuming processes, the detailed compliance requirements, and the necessary endurance through bureaucratic procedures.

Learning from these experiences, there was a call for improved communication and education about the regulatory framework for both inbound and outbound investment. Utilising Austrade's offices to connect businesses and conduct regular, detailed market research can enhance understanding and preparation for entering the Vietnamese market. It was suggested that annual updates on market conditions and trends be made more readily available. This would ensure businesses have the necessary information to make informed decisions about potential investments and export ventures.



# Territory-tailored investment strategy

The Northern Territory's economic dynamism is often tempered by the cyclical nature of its primary industries. The fluctuations of seasonal produce require innovative strategies that address immediate challenges and harness long-term opportunities.<sup>14</sup> Such strategies need to bolster the Territory's role as a gateway to Asia for Australian exports or enhance its attractiveness as a tourist destination for Vietnamese visitors, creating a reciprocal flow of visitors and goods.

This focused approach must also acknowledge and adapt to logistical challenges, such as the current limitations in commercial freight services and the reliance on tourism to drive air traffic. By diversifying the Northern Territory's economic portfolio and strengthening partnerships with countries like Vietnam, which can provide both a market for exports and a source of inbound tourism, the Territory can pave the way for increased air connectivity, benefitting passengers and freight services.

With a realistic lens, the Territory can calibrate its inbound investment strategy to its unique geographic and economic position. Participants suggested concentrating on a select number of robust investment projects, particularly those that build on existing markets, which can offer a pragmatic route to ensure deliverability and

*“[The question is] how to value add for both countries in a linear model.”*

– Roundtable Participant<sup>15</sup>

economic growth. These focal projects should be chosen for their viability and potential to enhance the Territory's current economic landscape, aligning with local strengths and Vietnamese demand.

Identifying the sectoral and economic market fit is all about offering what is in demand. Participants used the Northern Territory's experience with Indonesia as a case in point, where the export of live beef met a market need and returned value in the form of bone china – a byproduct crafted from the very cattle exported.



14. Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade, “Budget 2023-2024 Industry Outlook”, Northern Territory Government, (2022).

15. Industry participant in the Australia-Vietnam Darwin roundtable, 20 February 2024.



## Recommendations for the CSP

### Vietnamese Government

1. **Reciprocal workforce development and exchange:** To expand Vietnamese industry in Australia, complementary skill sets in the skilled and semi-skilled workforce are required. Examples include cattle ranching, tropical feedlot management, and aquaculture. By encouraging a reciprocal exchange program, both regions stand to gain through knowledge sharing and seasonal worker movement.
2. **Foreign ownership:** Initiate dedicated programs to assist Vietnamese businesses in understanding the regulatory and operational landscape. In collaboration with the Australian government, provide access to resources and consultancy services that offer guidance on investment opportunities.
3. **Invest in joint ventures and collaborations:** Encourage and support Vietnamese enterprises to enter joint ventures with Australian businesses. This could involve shared agricultural projects that leverage the Northern Territory's expertise in tropical climates or partnerships in renewable energy developments.

### Australian Government

1. **Support for diaspora initiatives:** Allocate resources to support the Vietnamese diaspora in the Northern Territory, including establishing or supporting a Territory-based chapter of an Australia-Vietnam Business Council to enhance business cohesion and community integration.
2. **Business matching:** Streamline government-led business matching initiatives, prioritising substance over formality to facilitate meaningful partnerships and trusted relations with Vietnamese counterparts.
3. **Delegation engagement:** Encourage inbound delegations to engage deeply with the Territory's industries, offering firsthand insight into operational excellence in sectors like cotton and cattle, thereby overcoming the 'Berrimah Line' perception.

## References

1. This discussion took place prior to the announcement of the Governments of Australia and Vietnam elevating the relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership on 7 March 2024. The contents of this paper reflect the anticipation of the CSP to ensure accurate representation of the discussion.
2. Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade, Northern Territory Government, "Reinvigorating trade and investment with Vietnam", accessed 12 March 2024, <https://industry.nt.gov.au/publications/business/publications/business-bulletins/july-to-september-2023/business-bulletin-10-august-2023>.
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7. Cotton Australia, "Katherine Cotton Gin opening marks a milestone for Northern Territory agriculture", accessed 12 March 2024, <https://cottonaustralia.com.au/news/katherine-cotton-gin-opening-marks-a-milestone-for-northern-territory-agriculture>.
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14. Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade, "Budget 2023-2024 Industry Outlook", Northern Territory Government, (2022).
15. Industry participant in the Australia-Vietnam Darwin roundtable, 20 February 2024.

## Images

Amorn Suriyan, Agriculture industry, dairy farming, livestock, animal health and welfare. Shutterstock. 4 April 2024.

BearFotos, Focused female farmers discussing and signing some papers while standing near car in backyard of farm on sunny spring day. Shutterstock. 4 April 2024.

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Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade

Darwin City Council

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association

AusNorth Trading

Australian Cattle Enterprises

NT Security Solutions

NT Chamber of Commerce

Vermelha Station

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