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Vietnam-US Relations: Past, Present, and Future

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Vietnam-US rapprochement in the past thirty-five years mostly took place after Vietnam overcame its own reluctance to move forward. Serious talks on normalizing diplomatic relations between the two countries began when Vietnam decided to withdraw troops from Cambodia in 1989. Normalization of trade became possible after Vietnamese leaders signed a bilateral trade agreement with the United States in 2000. This decision opened the door for Vietnam to join the World Trade Organization and gain Permanent Normal Trade Relations status. In the realm of military relations, Vietnam's reluctance to move forward was clearly demonstrated when it postponed several times the visit to Hanoi of US Secretary of Defense William Cohen until March 2000. Three years later, Vietnam sent its highest-ranking military leader, Minister of Defense General Pham Van Tra, to the United States for a reciprocal visit. During his visit, Tra made clear that Vietnam wanted to establish "a framework for a stable and long-term partnership." Once this hurdle within the sensitive realm of security relations had been overcome, progress moved rapidly.

Phan Van Khai was the first Vietnamese prime minister to visit the United States in June 2005 and was received by President George W. Bush at the White House. Khai pledged to improve religious freedom and agreed to send Vietnamese military officers to the United States for language and medical services training. In return, Bush agreed to support Vietnam's accession to the World Trade Organization and promised to visit Vietnam during the 2006 APEC summit. Khai's visit was followed by a flurry of visits to Vietnam by American business leaders, trade officials and military leaders. Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's visit to the United States in June 2008 marked another turning point, with Bush reiterating the US government's "support for Vietnam's national sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity." Four months later, the first political-military dialogue took place in Hanoi. Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh came to the United States in December 2009, further strengthening relations between the two militaries.

For strategic reasons, China does not want to see a close Vietnam-US alliance. Likewise, neither the United States nor Vietnam wishes to antagonize China unnecessarily. As the reigning superpower, the United States has more options than Vietnam. If good relations with China are desirable for the United States, they are a necessity for Vietnam. Vietnam must make difficult choices between the need to have good neighborly relations with China, and the imperative of affirming its sovereign right to pursue diplomatic and defense relations with other countries.

While the need to pay attention to Chinese sensitivities may pose an obstacle or slow down the rapprochement process, excessive Chinese demands and aggressive behaviors in the South China Sea in the last few years have led to a convergence of Vietnam-US security interests. Territorial conflicts, both at sea and on land, between Vietnam and China have been going on for many years, but drawing a U-shaped line claiming for China eighty percent of the South China Sea encroaches upon Vietnam's exclusive

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Professor at the Department
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economic zone. For the United States, China’s claims are excessive and not in conformity with international law. If China is able to enforce its claims, the South China Sea will become a Chinese lake. This impediment on the freedom of navigation is unacceptable to US global maritime power. China’s behavior, thus, has brought about a convergence of Vietnam-US strategic interests and an improvement in military cooperation between the two countries.

From an American strategic perspective, the United States is much more comfortable with Vietnam than China. While China may become a threat to the US security and global position, Vietnam will not. There is no strategic conflict between the United States and Vietnam, and Vietnam can be an important force contributing to the emerging Asia-Pacific security order. Vietnamese misperceptions of US intentions have led leaders to suspect that the United States wants to overthrow their communist regime. Party resolutions, media analyses, and official statements repeatedly refer to the danger of “peaceful evolution” and plots to overthrow the regime. While the United States would like to see Vietnam become more liberal and democratic, it has no plans to overthrow the government. The United States wants a strong, stable, and independent Vietnam, a sudden change of government does not serve US strategic interests.

Regarding shared values, it is possible to have cooperation and even a temporary alliance between countries of different or opposing political systems, but it is impossible to have a stable, long-term cooperative relationship. The different value systems of the United States and Vietnam will continue to affect the direction of Vietnam-US relations. It can draw them closer or may cause conflict. Human rights occupy a significant part of the bilateral relationship, reflecting core beliefs of the American people. Vietnam’s economic and strategic importance to the United States is not yet at the point that overwhelms human rights considerations. Many American veterans of the Vietnam War would like to see progress on human rights and democracy in Vietnam so that their sacrifices and those of their fallen comrades were not in vain. Moreover, democracy and respect for human rights are the prevailing trend. Vietnamese authorities themselves have pledged to build a “strong and prosperous country and a just, democratic, and civilized society.” Finally, concern over human rights has been institutionalized in US political discourse: the US Commission for International Religious Freedom, the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, and the Annual Report on Human Rights. Further improvement in Vietnam-US relations depends on how this issue is managed by both sides and, more importantly, on Vietnam’s own initiative regarding political reform.

Finally, Vietnamese-Americans can exercise either a positive or a negative influence on Vietnam-US relations. Vietnam looks upon the Vietnamese-American community as a source of finance, a pool of experts, and a potential force to lobby on behalf of Vietnam in the United States. In recent years, Vietnam has made efforts to reach out to overseas Vietnamese, particularly those in the United States, through the policy of “national reconciliation.” Steps have been taken to make it easier for overseas Vietnamese to buy houses in Vietnam, to visit the country, and to work there. These are small steps reflecting privileges accorded by the government to overseas Vietnamese, but they fail to address the need of genuine reconciliation based on mutual respect. This cannot happen so long as Vietnamese history books, media and official statements misrepresent the Vietnam War as a war between the United States and the Vietnamese people, where Southern soldiers and civilians are depicted as unpatriotic American lackeys. In the last five years, calls for understanding of and respect for the other have begun to be heard inside Vietnam, mostly from former government officials. Vietnamese national reconciliation is a historical duty with a potentially significant political impact. It may transform the opposition of Vietnamese communities overseas into powerful pro-Vietnam lobbying groups in practically every country in the world, and it certainly will cement the relationship between the United States and Vietnam.