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The Logic and Wisdom of Lifting the US Arms Embargo on Vietnam

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Some commentators, including human rights activists, have pointed to this week's Vietnamese government decision that prevented several Vietnamese human rights activists from meeting with President Obama during his visit to Hanoi as a clear indication that the US Government decision to lift the embargo on the sale of defense items to Vietnam was a miscalculation.

Importantly, maybe ironically, both the critics of decision in the US and the Vietnamese government apparatus that prevented Vietnamese activists from meeting with the President during his visit, share the logical failures in reasoning that have led to the conclusion that President Obama erred in his decision. Both fail to see the extent to which this decision is in the national interest of both the US and Vietnam.

Two key points need to be made about the challenge of moving forward with the US-Vietnamese strategic partnership in the defense and security arena.

First, if the only basis for bringing the US and Vietnam together is a common wariness about China, and specifically about China's aggressiveness in the South China Sea, then the US-Vietnam relationship in the defense and security realm does not have a firm, continuous basis for development. The bilateral military-security relationship needs to be based on more than just a common concern over China. For the US, the defense relationship with Vietnam should be based on the idea that a modern, well equipped, effectively led Vietnamese military will be a dependable partner on regional security and well-being (e.g., peacekeeping, humanitarian disaster relief, de-mining), not just a momentary ally in the context of China's bad behavior on the South China Sea. Lifting the remaining obstacles to developing that partnership will contribute to achieving these policy outcomes.

Second, for its part, Vietnam's rulership must not fear its people. Even the wildest pro-democracy ideas are still very Vietnamese, nationalist at their core, and fixed on Vietnam's equities. The party and the government in Hanoi have focused on lofty goals – protecting sovereignty, providing for the common defense, establishing the basis for growth and modernity, building a governing structure responsible for meeting the basic needs of the people – even if they have occasionally veered from sensible course of action and botched implementation of important policy goals. Vietnam has been far more open to mid-course corrections than China. Doing the right thing now means listening to the Vietnamese voices, heeding a broadening sense that heavy handed ways are taking the party and the government far afield from its trajectory and objectives, and distancing the party and the government from Vietnam – to the point of making Vietnam look more and more like China at least in the area of attitudes toward democracy, human rights, and religious freedoms. Vietnam has more to fear from a course of action that distances Vietnam from its historical identity as a nation of literate, articulate, argumentative, individualistic people than it does from the activities and behavior of dissidents. In this context, lifting

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the US arms embargo did not prompt the Vietnamese government to pocket this victory and proceed to act in accordance with stiff, unreasonable and inflexible views – but the lifting of the embargo gives the Vietnamese government the basis for making policy choices that diverge from these long standing starting points.

The decision to depart from a policy formula premised on the notion that security assistance to Vietnam is unthinkable before there is change to Vietnam’s human rights practices is based on an assessment that the Vietnamese can act in a way that recognizes the value of divergent, argumentative, lively debate in the political arena.

Human rights issues do not have to be an obstacle to expanding defense relations. The entire approach can be managed so that it does not look as though the Vietnamese government folded, and took this deal. It does not have to appear as though the USG staked out a position and won. Everyone can win.

Vietnam’s human rights record, including policies concerning religious freedom still, even in the face of the decision to lift the embargo, have the potential to remain a long-term obstacle to unobstructed progress in many areas of the bilateral relationship. The US-Vietnam human rights dialogue must address these enduring issues and devise practical solutions to the legitimate concerns voiced by critics of the regime, US lawmakers, organized ethnic Vietnamese interests, and non-governmental watchdogs among others regarding Vietnamese laws and policing practices in these areas.

However, the US should not make the acceptance of its position the price for Washington’s cooperation in other important aspects of rapprochement. The President calculated that penalizing the Vietnamese government by refraining to move forward with aspects of normalization – such as lifting the embargo on military sales – would give substantial support to those in Vietnam who vehemently oppose continued normalization, and undermine the US government’s ability to sustain dialogue and encourage the progress that has taken place.

In short, the Vietnamese must understand that influential interests in the US do indeed urge the government in Washington to move ahead with the relationship, and to specifically sustain progress in the military realm, because we believe in the relationship as a totality and because there are clear strategic dividends that redound to the US by following this course. But Vietnam must also understand that these interests are equally invested in seeing continued progress toward freedom of religion and broad citizen rights in Vietnam.

And critics of the decision to lift the embargo need to understand that, in the end, this was not an attempt to buy Vietnamese cooperation in some anti-China crusade in reaction to Chinese aggressive behavior in the South China Sea but part of a broader effort to urge and encourage Vietnam to be a more effective member of the ASEAN community, a responsible example of rational modern governance, a reliable partner for regional and extra-regional players (including the US) in the face of 21st century strategic challenges, as well as a country committed to protecting the well being of its people and respecting their human rights.

The Vietnamese are going to want to continue to frame discussion much more broadly than just maritime security, and may be especially wary of doing or saying anything that is exclusively bilateral with the US, or specifically “anti-China” in content or intention.

This is not a bad thing because it allows the US to serve broader interests: defining the basis for bilateral interoperability that would advance training possibilities, and developing commitment to cooperation in the regional context on humanitarian disaster relief and other multilateral areas of engagement – all of which are the very basic ingredients for a more effective level of practical bilateral cooperation between the US and the Vietnamese military establishments.

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