

Taking Stock of United States-Vietnam Relations 45 Years After the Fall of Saigon

By **Huong Le Thu**

In April President Donald Trump tweeted a thank you note for Vietnam's shipment of protective suits. Since then, Vietnam has sent about half a million personal protective equipment (PPE) items to the United States. This is how far U.S.-Vietnam relations have come on the 45th anniversary of the dramatic day (April 30) known in Vietnam as Saigon Liberation, or the Fall of Saigon.

"I cannot think of two countries that have worked harder, done more, and done better to try to bring themselves together and change history, to change the future, to provide a future for people that is very, very different" - said then Secretary of State John Kerry in 2013 – the year when the two became comprehensive partners. As a young soldier, Kerry had fought and later opposed the war in Vietnam.

Even today, many aspects of the relationship still carry symbolic as well as political value: For example, President Obama lifted the final war-time embargo following a visit to Hanoi in 2018. American warship visits, including most recently by the USS Theodore Roosevelt in March, the second aircraft carrier visit to Vietnam, still evoke memories of an adversarial past. President Trump's visit to Vietnam for the second summit with North Korea's Kim Jong-un last year had similar symbolic meaning, especially for Vietnamese; as the Trump administration pointed to Vietnam, unified under communist rule after the U.S. withdrawal, as a potential role model for Pyongyang of opening up.

Despite some continuing challenges in bilateral relations - including Vietnam's large trade surplus as well as distrust within elements of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) - the two countries also share views about the region, including threat perceptions of China. To many, shared concerns about China are the driving force for Vietnam-U.S. relations.

It was at the APEC Summit in Da Nang, Vietnam that President Donald Trump for the first time spoke about the "Indo-Pacific" – which became his administration's trademark policy – and called Vietnam the very heart of the Indo-Pacific. That speech was a prelude to the administration's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy (FOIP) which increasingly positioned China as a strategic competitor. Trump acknowledged Vietnam's proud history of independence and sovereignty, alluding to its maritime claims against China, and was well received by Vietnamese. This theme – of noting other claimants and denying the PRC's expansive and illegal claims and coercive behavior in the South China Sea – has become a major guiding principle of America's policy under Trump.

Dr. Huong Le Thu, Senior Analyst at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, explains that "To many, shared concerns about China are the driving force for Vietnam-U.S. relations."

As Washington increasingly sees the region through the geostrategic lens of competition with China, the convergence will grow with Hanoi in strategic outlook, and views on China's strategic ambitions in the region. Though FOIP continues to struggle for regional acceptance and support across Southeast Asia, Vietnam has been particularly supportive. Among all Southeast Asian peers, Vietnamese respondents to a focused survey also expressed the most confidence and support for the ideas and highest hope for the Quad's role in regional security.

Vietnamese views of the United States have been, surprisingly for many Americans, among the most positive in the world. In contrast to much of Southeast Asia, the Vietnamese generally seem to have more confidence, hope and expectation in Trump Administration policies and the United States. For example, a regional survey asked about U.S. leadership in a rules-based order and upholding international law, Vietnamese respondents were most supportive with 45.4% when the regional median was barely 24.3%. Some 55% of Vietnamese respondents have some confidence in the U.S. security role in the region, whereas the Southeast Asian median was 32% - a sharp decline compared to previous years. In a hypothetical scenario of being forced to choose side between the United States and China, the most likely to choose the United States were the Vietnamese at 85.5%, while the median for the region was 53.6%. While an overwhelming majority believe that U.S. engagement in Southeast Asian has decreased under the Trump Administration, only the Vietnamese respondents thought that it actually increased. Obviously, the difference can be explained by the "starting point": for many Southeast Asians, particularly allies and long-term partners, who have had stronger and longer relations with the United States. For Vietnam, the change seems, still, on the upward trajectory.

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During the past forty-five years since the end of the Vietnam War, the former foes are growing closer. Vietnam may well turn out to be a key U.S. partner in the region.

Under President Trump, Washington toned down on the criticism of Vietnam's human rights record, which was reassuring to the VCP. Hanoi's growing insecurity in the South China Sea made it revise its defense policies and as signaled in the recently released Defense White Paper, it is more open to defense cooperation, including extending opportunities for US Navy and Coast Guards port visits.

There is a level of anticipation for elevating the relationship to the level of strategic partnership – something that has been in talks, and doubts, for a while. A visit from Party Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong to Washington was delayed due to his health. The US-ASEAN Special Summit this year, during which Vietnam chairs the regional organization, has been postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Given the political landscape, upcoming elections in the U.S. late this year, and 13th Party Congress in Hanoi early next year, the chances for high-level meetings are slim. In the meantime, there are opportunities to continue quiet work to advance the relationship via official channels outside the spotlight.

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