

From Foe to Friend: A US-Vietnam Strategic Partnership
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Core US concerns with Vietnam remain unresolved, the most prominent being democracy and human rights.

In 1975, with the fall of South Vietnam to the North, the United States' presence in Vietnam finally came to an end. For years after, memories of that disastrous foreign adventure haunted Americans, the desire of "not another Vietnam" weighing heavily over its foreign policy.

It took the decisive victory over Saddam Hussein during the Persian Gulf War for Americans to regain confidence in their armed forces; but it was not until July 11, 1995 when President Bill Clinton officially normalized relationships with the unified, Communist Vietnam could a new chapter between the US and Vietnam be written.

Perhaps as a measure of how much has changed, today the US looks to Vietnam as a potential strategic partner in the 21st century. America, in its pivot to Asia-Pacific and its wariness of an increasingly assertive China, has turned to trusted regional allies such as the Philippines, Thailand, South Korea, Japan and Australia. The addition of the South China Sea disputes further gives the US's return to the Asia-Pacific an air of danger, raising fears within Beijing that Washington is building a coalition of Southeast Asian nations to stifle China's rise. Whether true or false, Vietnam has factored itself back into US politics.

Pivot to Asia-Pacific

Facing deep cuts to its defense budget, US foreign policy objectives in Asia-Pacific will undoubtedly take into account the new limitations of its military. It should therefore come to no surprise that Leon Panetta, the Secretary of Defense, spent much of his tour through Asia, from Singapore to India, outlining the US's new role in the region.

Piracy, terrorism, and human and narcotics trafficking are considered serious threats to US interests. Moreover, these issues were also raised as threats to nations in the region. It is the hope, then, that the US could count on its regional allies to help combat these problems. Rather than taking the reins itself, it seems as if the US is content with supporting its allies on tackling these issues themselves instead of spearheading them alone.

China was noticeably absent from Secretary Panetta's places to visit. Among the nations visited by the Secretary of Defense was Vietnam, which has been a thorn in China's side regarding the Paracel and Spratly Island disputes.

It is no great secret that the US has been growing closer to Vietnam over the years. Joint naval exercises between the two countries, port visits in Vietnam by the US Navy, and US support for a multilateral resolution to the South China Sea disputes have merely reinforced this image of Vietnam as a strategic partner in the US's Asia-Pacific pivot.

Insurmountable obstacles

The future and success of US-Vietnam relations, however, will be dependent on whether

Vietnam can address the US's core concerns, the most crucial being human rights. The United States has yet to lift its ban on selling lethal weapons to Vietnam for this very reason, demanding that Vietnam make the necessary improvements. Although Hanoi has released some of its political prisoners as a gesture of goodwill, such an act has fooled no one. Democratic and human rights activists continue to be arrested.

More than its struggling human rights record, Vietnam remains questionable as to whether it can be counted upon as a trusted ally. Washington is acutely aware that what is sold cannot be retrieved, and arming a state that may potentially use American-made weapons for reasons other than what Washington intended could be disastrous.

The US has no desire to go to war with China, and vice versa. In the event that Vietnam enters into conflict with China using weapons provided by the US, the use of said weapons could be misconstrued by China as tacit American approval of Vietnamese action. While China is unlikely to hold the US directly accountable for Vietnamese activities, Washington would not like to find itself in a position where it must defend its sale of armaments to a nation, and at the same time protest against said nation's use of these armaments.

“Friends” and Friends

Another matter that has not endeared Vietnam to the US has been its mercurial nature on the world stage. Vietnam, in effort to counter China's growing influence, has been courting India, Russia, UK and the US, hoping that such efforts would deter potential Chinese aggression. Hanoi, however, would be mistaken to believe that India and Russia would rush to Vietnam's aid in the event of a conflict with China. Neither India nor Russia will jeopardize their relationship with China over Vietnam, a country whose respective importance is arguable.

Vietnam, as a sovereign nation, has the freedom to pursue whatever relationship it desires. It is not Vietnam's partnership with India that has annoyed China, or its partnership with Russia that has annoyed the US. Rather, it is Vietnam's transparent attempt at using these countries against China.

It is undoubtedly evident to the US that Vietnam is seeking a closer relationship with America not because it wants to, but because it needs to. Certainly, this is not to say that partnerships of convenience are wrong; however, the US has no desire to play Vietnam's game with China in much the same way Vietnam has no desire to play the US' games with China. The difference between the two, however, is that China would pose a greater threat to Vietnam than the US.

The requirement that Vietnam improve its human rights record is not too much to ask. Vietnam has nothing to lose by treating its citizens with greater respect. That being said, the government stands to lose its authority should democratization occur—an inevitable conclusion, one can assume, once the people are free to voice their political opposition without fear of repercussion. Therefore Hanoi's refusal to respect human rights has nothing to do with its personal beliefs on the matter but a desperate attempt to hold onto power. It is right in fearing that any attempt at democratization, which the US would wholeheartedly support, would ultimately spell the end of the Communist regime.

While seeking American support and maintaining its fragile relationship with China, Vietnam

has only succeeded in irritating the two. The Communist Party has demonstrated itself to be an unreliable partner, unwilling to commit. The democratization of Vietnam would be welcomed by the United States, but it should also be welcomed by China.

A free and democratic Vietnam would invite a level of predictability now missing in Vietnamese foreign affairs. While it is uncertain as to whether the US or China would benefit from such a change, what is certain is that both countries will be able to approach a Vietnamese government that is less likely to play games.

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