Montana’s Role in the Strategically-Important Relationship Between the U.S. and Vietnam

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For many of us, Vietnam engenders memories of a long and bitter war. It took twenty years for the U.S. to escape the dark shadow of the past and to reestablish relations with Vietnam. This year marks the fifteenth anniversary of the resumption of diplomatic ties between the two countries. Shared interests impel the U.S. and Vietnam to improve cooperation in trade, education and the environment. Montana has a key role to play in this relationship, drawing on the best of its attributes to address some of the greatest needs of each country.

Over the centuries, Vietnam’s national identity has been shaped by extended conflicts with both internal and foreign forces. Chinese dynasties ruled Vietnam for 1,000 years, influencing its culture, but also inspiring a tradition of resistance to foreign occupation, as demonstrated in Vietnamese struggles against Chinese, French, Japanese, and Americans. Our withdrawal from Vietnam led to the triumph of the communist regime and the formation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in July 1976.

Following the failure of Communist central planning, in 1986 Vietnam implemented economic reforms known as "Doi Moi," or renovation, based loosely on Chinese Dengist reforms. The move to a more market-oriented model improved the quality of life for many Vietnamese. Vietnam became one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, with agricultural production nearly doubling. Though the government controls major sectors of the economy, Vietnam has recognized the importance of global interdependence and has adjusted its foreign relations accordingly. It currently chairs ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and holds a seat on the UN Security Council.
Though we remain bogged down in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. has begun to realize that deepening engagement with countries in the Asia-Pacific is crucial for the advancement of our strategic and economic interests. Vietnam is of particular importance given its ambivalent relationship with China, a pro-American attitude, and a young population of 86 million people—all living in an area smaller than the state of Montana.

And in fact, things have already changed in several key areas. The U.S. is currently Vietnam’s second-largest trade partner after China. The Obama Administration is currently seeking to broaden the trade relationship with Vietnam by signing an agreement called the Trans-Pacific Partnership with seven Asian countries, including Vietnam. Montana workers, businesses, farmers, and ranchers stand to benefit from new export opportunities with Vietnam.

The U.S. and Montana also share a number of environmental priorities with Vietnam: climate change; flood and drought management; hydropower and impact assessment; food security; and water resource management. In Vietnam, rapid economic growth and associated increased exploitation of natural resources have created significant pressures on the environment. According to the World Bank, Vietnam will be one of the top ten countries affected by climate change by the year 2050. Nearly every sector will be affected, as forests, agriculture, fisheries, power, water, and education and health facilities are at all risk. These issues are further complicated by expanded mining interests, as well as a growing tourism industry heavily dependent on environmental stability and health. Montana offers unique expertise in these areas.

The U.S.-Vietnam relationship also shows potential in the realm of education. Vietnamese students rank seventh in the number of international students in the U.S.—a 46 percent increase over
the prior year. The government of Vietnam is looking toward expanding student and faculty training abroad, thus creating another opportunity for Montana. The University of Montana has been designated a lead institution in the Department of State’s education initiative in Vietnam. Expanding educational partnerships would involve Montana in an effort to address some still-troubling issues in Vietnamese society and politics. At a time when Vietnam’s human rights record has deteriorated, initiating vibrant educational training programs in Montana would expose Vietnamese participants to the ideals and practices of a free American society.

For these reasons, UM recently sent a U.S. government-funded delegation to Vietnam to assess possible cooperative efforts in education, among them a month-long study abroad program on climate change, to begin this December. Such opportunities for students and faculty contribute to their development as well as to the globalization of our universities. Accomplishing UM’s goal of bringing greater numbers of Vietnamese teachers and students here would add a welcome economic infusion to the community and state, while also contributing in cultural terms. Finally, new linkages and business-related programs would position Montana companies to benefit from a burgeoning Vietnamese economy. As the bilateral relationship grows, cooperation with Vietnam would put Montana at the forefront of our national effort to re-engage an increasingly prosperous and dynamic society.

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