U.S.-Vietnamese Relations in a Changed Strategic Environment

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By Terry Weidner, Director of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center

The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center recently joined with colleagues at the Mansfield Foundation in Washington, D.C., recently to host a three day retreat and public conference on U.S.-Vietnam relations. The program featured very high level officials, former officials, and top academic experts from both sides.

This begs a question: Who cares? Even if one is deeply concerned with U.S. foreign policy, wouldn’t Vietnam be low on our list of concerns even in Asia—certainly ranking below China and North Korea?

Probably. But good ideas aren’t always the most obvious ideas, and good strategic policy often isn’t merely reactive to crisis. I’m glad the Mansfield Center and the University of Montana are on the ground floor in working with Vietnam, for several reasons: First, objectively, Vietnam is growing in importance. An emerging market economy, it has, believe it or not, virtually matched China’s economic record in its early years of reform. As reflected in its skilled chairmanship of ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, a vital regional trade network in which the U.S. invests more than three times what it invests in China each year, Vietnam has also shown a willingness and ability to be “a responsible global stakeholder” in a vital region. At a more concrete level, Vietnam also offers an astonishingly hospitable environment for Montana faculty and students to study Asian perspectives and key global problems like development and climate change in a very different context then they have here.
On a personal level, I would also suggest that Vietnam is a nice story of reconciliation. Despite the horrors of a bitter war with Vietnam that resulted in 50,000 U.S. casualties and more than one million war dead in Vietnam, both sides seem ready to move on. “That is not our nature to dwell on the past,” Vietnamese will tell you. If you press them, they will inevitably peel back another layer. Citing a history of war and colonization, they will say “We don’t have the luxury of holding grudges.” “Besides, we’re practical. We know we need you.” In point of fact, it is now clear that Vietnam and the U.S. have decided they need each other. And that is clearly one of the reasons we were able to draw so many high level Vietnamese and American leaders and analysts together during a snowy spring week in Montana.

So what forces are behind the accelerating bilateral interest in improving relations? First, the progress made over many years on so called “heritage issues” left over from the war—MIAs and help for agent orange victims chief among them—has helped paved the way for progress in other areas. Beginning in 2003, when Vietnam fully committed itself to market reform, the US also became a vital source of potential investment, technology and exports. As it did so, many remaining political and military concerns in Hanoi started to fade in importance.

But nothing has done more for the improvement of U.S.-Vietnam relations than Vietnam’s feelings about China. Many of us know Vietnam as a former Confucian state and therefore imagine some kinship between Vietnam and China. But most Vietnamese see the historical relationship with China as more than a thousand years of Chinese colonization and exploitation. As a result, they don’t like or trust the Chinese.

And that feeling has hardened as China has become more powerful and thus perceived as more threatening to its small neighbor to the south. Vietnam has become particularly alarmed as China has
begun to flex its muscles in the South China Sea, a vital choke point for virtually all regional trade and the home for the Spratly and Paracel Islands, both of which are thought to be very rich in oil and gas reserves. The islands are thus claimed by a number of states in the region, including Vietnam and China. After decades of an uneasy regional truce over these disputed territories, China has become much more assertive in reinforcing its unilateral claims, breaking an unbroken rule by building structures on the islands, sharply increasing the number of so-called “fishing” ships surrounding them, and—more significantly—formally and loudly proclaiming China’s suzerainty over virtually the entire area of the South China Sea.

Because Vietnam’s pragmatism extends to its relations with the PRC—which, one of our conference participants reminded us “is very big, is right next door, and unfortunately, is not going away” -- Vietnam has done all it could to keep its relations with China amicable. But Hanoi was sufficiently concerned about China’s new assertiveness that it stepped out of character last year to organize a regional statement of protest against China’s new claims in the region. And it’s clear Vietnam was quietly thrilled when Secretary of State Hilary Clinton subsequently declared that the South China Sea was also an area of “vital concern” to the United States.

Secretary Clinton’s statement signaled our intent to reassert ourselves in Asia after virtually ceding influence in the region to China when we became consumed by our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. One of the diplomatic vehicles we seem to have in mind to help re-engage in Asia is something called the Trans Pacific Partnership, or TPP, a commercial and strategic grouping that will not only have the U.S. at its center and include Vietnam as a vital member, but initially exclude China. (Hey, nobody said we were subtle). At least for now, that sounds good to Vietnam.
Realistically (as a Vietnamese foreign ministry official sympathetic to warming relations warned us), Vietnam-U.S. relations may have hit a temporary ceiling. Differences remain, for example, over key issues like human rights, which seem to have disintegrated in Vietnam in recent years. There is also an ongoing question of trust. Above all, Vietnam is not convinced that the U.S. will this time remain engaged in the region and can be counted on to provide a hedge against China, particularly at a time of crisis. As they put it, “Distant water cannot be used for a nearby fire.”

We will all have to wait to see how these geo-political forces play out, but the new relationship with Vietnam has opened doors that clearly benefit the people of both sides, certainly including those of us in Montana. We’re confident that will continue.

I’m Terry Weidner, Director of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at the University of Montana. The Mansfield Center encourages understanding between the United States and Asia and works to keep alive the Mansfields’ belief in ethics in public affairs.