

Vietnam, US en route to normality

Tens years after the resumption of diplomatic relations, both the US and Vietnam seem eager to leave the past behind and strive for better relations in the future.

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*By Dr. Michael Waibel and Matthias Becker
for ISN Security Watch (20/06/05)*

Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khai is scheduled to pay a historic visit to the US on 21 June on an invitation from US President George Bush. Ten years after the resumption of diplomatic ties on 11 July 1995, this event marks a further milestone in relations between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the US, as Khai will be the first Vietnamese prime minister to visit the US since the end of the war in Vietnam on 30 April 1975. Looking back on ten years of normalization between the US and Vietnam in May this year, US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick appraised the relationship as "strong", while his Vietnamese colleague, Deputy Foreign Minister Le Van Bang, said "the two sides have been determined to take bilateral ties to new heights of development". However, looking beyond the diplomatic statements, there are political, economic, and historical aspects of US-Vietnamese relations that could slow the current efforts towards normalization. The fall of Saigon in 1975, and the evacuation of the last US staff from the embassy there finally confirmed the defeat of the US army in Vietnam. By the time the North Vietnamese troops marched into Saigon, more than three million Vietnamese on both sides had died in the war, as well as at least one million Laotians and Cambodians and about 58,000 US soldiers. It has been comparably easier for the Vietnamese, as the winners of the conflict, to put the bitter memories of the war aside. In fact, until this day, the victory over the US still constitutes the main political legitimization of Vietnam's single-party rule. The US, on the other hand, for a long time refused to accept its defeat in the war. As a result, the public was affected by a deep trauma, the impact of which can still be felt today.



War and other legacies

On the policy level, Washington's attitude towards Vietnam since the war has been such that one might have assumed that the US had reason to bear a grudge against Vietnam, rather than vice versa. The Vietnam War has also cast its long shadow on subsequent US military operations: When the US invaded Afghanistan to fight the Taliban, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was forced to respond publicly to charges that the operation there had become bogged down in a "quagmire". This was the term used to describe the difficult situation of US forces during the Vietnam War, and it has since become a synonym for being stuck in a hopeless situation. The use of the term "quagmire" to describe the war in Afghanistan - and even more so, the US invasion and the ongoing occupation of Iraq - illustrates the widespread fear in US society of becoming involved in situations that even vaguely resemble the Vietnam fiasco. Some other legacies of the US-Vietnamese conflict can be identified. Against the background of an economy that President Lyndon Johnson neglected to adapt to wartime footing, the result was increasing inflation that created unfavorable conditions for the so-called baby boomers. The cost of the Vietnam war grew continuously and became a serious burden on the US economy. To some degree, the Iraq occupation has had a similar effect on the US financial system. In addition, the Vietnam war created deep divisions in US society that formed a social and cultural watershed, the legacy of which can still be seen today. The trust in the nation's political institutions and leaders eroded, and the subsequent Watergate and Iran-Contra scandals seemed consistent with the peddling of falsehoods during the Vietnam era. The existence of a national US trauma can also be inferred from the high number of publications describing the Vietnam war from the US point of view, as well as from the astonishing amount of Hollywood movies on the war. Finally, the legacy of Vietnam played a controversial role in the last US presidential election campaign. The two candidates, George Bush and John Kerry, both attempted to discredit each other over their experiences from 1968 to 1969. While Bush was able to avoid the war as a pilot in the Texas National Guard, his Democratic challenger Kerry has been accused by veterans of having improperly touted his achievements as a war hero. These are just a few examples of the deep-rooted legacy of the Vietnam war and its effect on the collective US national psyche. The impact of the war on the Vietnamese people has been substantially higher. Besides the high casualties among the population, the destruction of the country itself was terrible. Whole districts were defoliated and burned, cities were overwhelmed with refugees, and unexploded ordnance and landmines as well as residual toxins remain a problem today. Shortly after the US forces were driven out of the country, Vietnam found itself in military conflict with Cambodia (1978/79) and with China (1979). Also, the stabilization of the country after its reunification turned

out to be far more complicated than expected. Vietnam was not able to solve its structural economic problems and was threatened by several famines in the 1980s. It was not until the introduction of the reform policy known as Doi Moi in 1986, that the Vietnamese government was able to tackle these problems appropriately.

US-Vietnam relations since 1975

The US combat role in the war ended on 29 March 1973, when the last US troops left Vietnam as stipulated by the Paris Peace Accords signed by the US, South Vietnam, and North Vietnam. With the surrender of South Vietnam on 30 April 1975, the US government extended its embargo against North Vietnam to all of Vietnam. Early post-war hopes for a normalization of relations between the former enemies were dashed after the US government refused to deliver the reconstruction aid it had promised. With most of the Western European countries and the non-communist Asian nations supporting the US-led embargo as a reaction against the invasion of Cambodia, Vietnam became almost isolated. In addition, the US lost interest in repairing relations after Vietnam had declared its affiliation with the Soviet Bloc and had begun to pursue an isolationist strategy. Official contacts were only established by the US to resolve the fate of US servicemen missing in action (MIAs). In the mid-1980s, there was increasing opposition in the US against the government's isolationist strategy. In the economic sphere, in the media, and also in Congress, a growing number of voices demanded a change in US foreign policy towards Vietnam. The introduction of the Doi Moi reforms and the opening of the country to foreign investors by the Vietnamese side favored a resumption of diplomatic relations. But initially, not even the withdrawal of the Vietnamese troops from Cambodia in September 1989 brought any significant change in the US-Vietnamese relationship. In 1991, the government of Vietnam allowed the US to open an office for the investigation of MIA issues. In response, the administration of George Bush Sr. presented Hanoi with a "Road Map" for the gradual normalization of relations on 9 April 1991. Although the implementation schedule of this road map was delayed and the isolation of Vietnam was maintained in many areas, the economic embargo was not lifted. With this hard-line policy, the US administration submitted to the strong political influence of activist groups such as the "National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia", even though the Reagan administration had already pointed out that it was impossible to resolve the MIA issue completely.

Progress under Clinton

Extensive steps towards normalization were made under the presidency of Bill Clinton, which began in January 1993. Though he also faced strong domestic opposition to a détente with Hanoi, Clinton cleared the way for the resumption of international lending to Vietnam, including loans from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, on 2 July 1993. By this time, the US was one of the last few countries that lacked full diplomatic relations with Vietnam, and was thus unable to benefit from the economic recovery there in the 1990s that allowed Hanoi to develop closer political and economic ties with its neighbors as well as the EU. In February 1994, Clinton lifted the trade embargo, and in July of the following year, he announced the "normalization of relations" with Vietnam. Since then, a broad range of diplomatic and economic activities has contributed to the improvement of relations. In March 1998, Clinton granted Vietnam a waiver of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment for the first time, and that waiver has been renewed annually ever since. The Jackson-Vanik Amendment links US trade benefits, formerly known as Most Favored Nation (MFN) status and now called Normal Trade Relations (NTR), to the emigration and human rights policies of communist or formerly communist countries. The first political consultations between the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry and the US State Department took place in Hanoi in 1999. By 2004, there had been four rounds of political dialog. Clinton himself paid an official visit to Vietnam in November 2000, during which scores of technological and scientific exchange and trade agreements were signed. The following year, Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong and US President Bush signed a Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA). It was renewed on 11 December 2003, one day before the official resumption of direct flights between Vietnam and the US, which had been suspended in 1975. Since then, the range and scope of visits at different levels have been clearly increased, channels for discussions and visits have been expanded, and several agreements on political, economic, and social issues have been signed. These developments came against the background of a new Vietnamese policy of increased openness that brought market-led reforms and an export-led strategy. Vietnam's accession to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995 and to the Asian Pacific Economic Community (APEC) in 1998 were important milestones in this context. The Vietnamese-American community has also played and still plays an important role in the bilateral relations. The younger generation of Vietnamese-Americans has exerted political pressure on Washington to improve the relationship and to benefit from the economic advantages of cooperating with Hanoi.

Shift from politics to economics

In all likelihood, the first official visit of Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khai to the US, planned for 21 June, will further strengthen relations. It is expected that Vietnam's WTO membership will be one of the major concerns for the Vietnamese side during the visit - evidence that attention has meanwhile shifted from political normalization to economic normalization. The most important economic step was the entry into force of the BTA in December 2001. Consequently, bilateral trade has grown rapidly. The US has, in the meantime, become Vietnam's largest export market, while exports from the US to Vietnam have also increased. Considering that only ten years have passed since the resumption of diplomatic ties, the improvements in US-Vietnamese foreign

relations are truly remarkable. However, some obstacles to a full normalization of relations still remain. A court in New York recently rejected a lawsuit brought by the Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin (VAVA) against US chemical corporations. According to the judge, US enterprises cannot be held responsible for the spraying of herbicides for defoliation by the US government. As a result, the effects of the US army's chemical weapons in Vietnam are still not being dealt with appropriately. Washington rejects comprehensive support or assistance to solve these special problems. Even worse, the impact of the spraying missions might have been seriously underestimated, as a 2003 study suggests. Another obstacle is the question of human rights and religious freedom. The US administration has repeatedly expressed its concerns about the Vietnamese authorities' hesitant implementation of human rights and religious freedom standards. Although some progress has been made, and Prime Minister Khai recently instructed local authorities to make available "normal religious facilities" even to Protestant organizations that had not yet been granted legal status, the US still believes more needs to be done. The Vietnamese government, in turn, regards such demands as meddling in the internal affairs of the country. It is worth mentioning that no human rights conditions were attached to the signing of the BTA, nor to any other similar treaties, as had been proposed by some members of the US Congress and several other organizations. Besides the aforementioned issues, other concerns remain on both sides, such as the still unresolved question of MIAs and prisoners of war (POWs), relations between Vietnam and other Communist nations (North Korea, Cuba), or the US occupation of Iraq. All these obstacles influence the relations to various degrees and sometimes lead to irritations in the cooperation between the two countries. At this juncture in the process of normalization between the US and Vietnam, both sides seem eager to leave the past behind and strive for better relations in the future. So far, relations between the two countries are still at the beginning of what may yet become a sustainable, trust-based partnership. Further challenges will need to be tackled, including sensitive issues like human rights, minority concerns, or the Agent Orange question. The bilateral cooperation over Vietnam's WTO membership bid, as well as the upcoming visit by Prime Minister Khai to the US, will be important contributions to developing a more comprehensive relationship.

Dr. Michael Waibel [mwaibel@gwdg.de] is an assistant professor at the Department of Cultural and Social Geography at the University of Göttingen, Germany. He is the secretary-general of the Association for Pacific Studies (APSA) and the editor-in-chief of two regular publications, PAZIFIK FORUM and PACIFIC NEWS.

Matthias Becker [rmbecker@gmx.de] holds an advanced degree in Geography. He is currently freelancing at BBJ Consult AG, Berlin, Germany. He has conducted several projects in Southeast Asia within the framework of EU programs.

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