

June 20, 2007

REVIEW & OUTLOOK**Business or Pressure?**

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The Vietnamese President's trip to the U.S. this week marks a historic step in postwar ties between the two countries, and also an opportunity. Business will certainly be on the agenda when Nguyen Minh Triet meets George W. Bush on Friday. But Hanoi's human-rights record will also be a central topic of discussion throughout the visit, whether Mr. Triet wants it to be or not.

Vietnam's economy, which Mr. Triet hopes to promote on this visit, is increasingly dependent on trade with the U.S. Vietnam exported \$6.6 billion in goods to the U.S. in 2005, the most recent year for which comprehensive data are available. Its gross domestic product that year was \$52 billion, while the U.S. market accounted for 20% of Vietnam's exports. That share has been growing steadily as Vietnam weans itself off its dependence on its Asian neighbors and the former Soviet Union.

**Minh Triet Nguyen**

Accession to the World Trade Organization and establishment of permanent normal trade relations with the U.S. have marked major victories for Vietnam. Expect Mr. Triet to try to build on those successes this week by lobbying for even freer trade between the two countries, perhaps even by broaching the possibility of a future free trade agreement.


In addition to cracking open further the U.S. market for Vietnamese exports, Mr. Triet is hoping to tap America's large population of Vietnamese expatriates as an enthusiastic new source of investment. In a pre-visit interview with the state news agency, Mr. Triet noted that half of the Vietnamese living abroad are in the U.S. "Vietnamese living in the U.S. have great potential in terms of economy and knowledge," he

said.

All of which explains why Mr. Triet will have little choice but to talk about his regime's deteriorating human-rights record. Hanoi's recent crackdown on dissidents threatens the rest of his agenda for his time in the U.S.

The wave of repression, which began in earnest in February and has been documented before in these columns, has created an international stir. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice raised objections in a meeting in March with her Vietnamese counterpart. The U.S. House of Representatives has passed a resolution condemning the crackdown. The White House included a pointed statement about human rights even in the official announcement of Mr. Triet's visit issued earlier this month, saying that the crackdown "will inevitably limit the growth of bilateral

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ties."

Meantime, the Vietnamese-American community is a hotbed of anti-regime activism. It's a source of financial and moral support for dissidents within Vietnam, and its members have been successful in drawing Washington's attention to rights abuses -- witness the House resolution and Mr. Bush's recent Oval Office meeting with four leading émigré rights activists. The community is not monolithic and many émigré investors, like investors everywhere, are merely seeking higher returns. But the ranks of expat and potential investors also include those who are concerned about political developments in the country.

Hanoi has released two high-profile political prisoners in recent weeks in an effort to deflect some of the heat for its rights abuses. The most recently freed is Le Quoc Quan. Mr. Quan was rounded up in March, only four days after returning from Washington, where he had completed a congressionally funded fellowship at the National Endowment for Democracy.

His arrest was a public relations disaster for Hanoi, spurring condemnation from former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Senator John McCain and others. The other freed political prisoner was Nguyen Vu Binh, a cyberdissident who had been arrested in 2002 and was serving a seven-year sentence. Ms. Rice had called for his release in March.

So far so good, but there are many more where those came from. Other high-profile dissidents still languish in prison, as dissident Nguyen Dan Que explains on a nearby page. Mr. Triet is likely to hear the name of Father Nguyen Van Ly, for one, during his visit. Father Ly is a Catholic priest recently sentenced to eight years in jail for his pro-democracy activism and has become an international cause celebre.

Mr. Triet is hoping that economic issues will dominate his discussions this week. And both the U.S. and Vietnam will benefit from deeper trading ties between the two countries. But Mr. Triet is about to discover that economic growth and political freedom are hard to separate, even on a meeting agenda.

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