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ABN # 65 648 097 123



Background Brief:

U.S.-Vietnam Relations on the 46th Anniversary of the Fall of Saigon

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April, 2021

On the occasion of the Fall of Saigon (30 April 1975), we will release a report on the U.S.-Vietnam relationship. We request your assessment of the achievements as well as the future of the two countries' relations.

Q1-The past twenty-six years have witnessed remarkable developments across the board in U.S.-Vietnam relations. What area of cooperation between the two countries is most impressive to you and why?

ANSWER: The 2013 Joint Statement by Presidents Barack Obama and Truong Tan Sang establishing a comprehensive partnership listed nine-areas of cooperation: political-diplomatic, trade-economic, science and technology, education, environment and health, war legacy, defence and security, promotion and protection of human rights, and culture-tourism-sport.

The most remarkable development in bilateral relations has been trade and economic cooperation. This area has witnessed spectacular growth following the Bilateral Trade Agreement that came into force in December 2001. Two-way trade is expected to reach \$100 billion in 2021, up from \$90.8 billion in 2020. The United States is Vietnam's largest export market.

While there have been irritations and friction in economic relations, particularly during the Trump Administration, Vietnam's newly appointed Minister of Industry and Trade, Tran Tuan Anh, spoke with President Biden's new U.S. Trade Representative, Katherine Tai, on 1st April. Anh's ministry released a statement the following day promising "to actively cooperate to comprehensively address the concerns [of the U.S.] to maintain a stable trade relation."

Q2-Given China's growing ambition in the South China Sea and Mekong River region, many suggest Vietnam should deepen its defence cooperation with the U.S. to ensure its sovereignty and security. In your view, what should Vietnam and the U.S. do to strengthen their defence ties? Can Vietnam still maintain its neutral defence policy? Is it a wise decision for Vietnam to maintain such a cautious defence policy in the coming time if China further increases its assertiveness in the South China Sea?

ANSWER: Vietnam and the United States have set out the framework for bilateral defence cooperation in two major documents, a Memorandum of Understanding to Advance Bilateral Defence Cooperation in 2011 and a Joint Vision Statement on Defence Relations in 2015.

Between 2015-19, the U.S. provided Vietnam US \$53 million in Direct Commercial Sales for fire control, laser, imaging, and guidance equipment; military electronics; and gas turbine engines and associated equipment. Vietnam also purchased US \$130 million under the U.S. Foreign Military Sales program.

From 2016-20, Vietnam received US \$300 million under the Foreign Military Financing programme. During this period, the U.S. transferred two decommissioned Hamilton-class Coast Guard cutters (a third will be delivered later this year) and twenty-four fast Patrol Boats, coastal radar, provided professional training for military pilots, and sold six ScanEagle aerial drones for delivery in 2022. Also during this period, Vietnam hosted separate visits by the *USS Carl Vinson* and *USS Theodore Roosevelt* aircraft carriers; and Vietnam participated in the Rim of the Pacific exercises for the first time.

According to Admiral Philip Davidson, Commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, the United States seeks to create a “network of interoperable allies and partners willing and able to protect their sovereignty from coercion.” Vietnam is likely to come under U.S. pressure to cooperate more in regional security with the United States and its allies.

At first glance, Vietnam’s defence policy of “four no’s” would appear to preclude Vietnam from joining this U.S.-led network. However, according to Vietnam’s 2019 Defence White Book, “Depending on circumstances and specific conditions, Viet Nam will consider developing necessary, appropriate defence and military relations with other countries...” In other words, the scope and pace of future defence cooperation between Vietnam and the U.S. will depend on China’s behaviour.

If China should become markedly more assertive and belligerent in the South China Sea, Vietnam would have to reconsider its existing policy. At the present time, bilateral defence cooperation should continue on its present trajectory with a priority on maritime security capacity-building and maritime domain awareness, particularly with the U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Navy.

Q3-Promoting human rights is a pillar of President Biden’s foreign policy. Do you think human rights will be a major stumbling block to a closer relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam in the future? What do you think of Vietnam’s cooperation with the U.S. in human rights over the past years?

ANSWER: The Department of State under President Biden has been more vocal in issuing statements that are critical of Vietnam for arresting individuals for free speech. For example, on 26 April the State Department issued a press release expressing concern about the arrest of four journalists connected with the *Bao Sach* (Clean Journalism), group.

It is likely that members of the U.S. Congress, Representatives and Senators from both political parties, will raise human rights concerns in Vietnam, especially on the occasion of high-level visits. These officials will respond to the lobbying by their constituents, especially the Vietnamese-American community.

In addition, the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA), passed during the Trump presidency, specifically expresses serious concern over the rule of law and civil liberties in Vietnam (as well as Cambodia, China, North Korea, Laos, and Thailand)

Under the Trump Administration human rights hardly played a role in bilateral relations. It was either glossed over or omitted from joint statements by high-level leaders.

Suggested citation: Carlyle A. Thayer, "U.S.-Vietnam Relations on the 46th Anniversary of the Fall of Saigon," *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, April 27, 2021. All background briefs are posted on Scribd.com (search for Thayer). To remove yourself from the mailing list type, UNSUBSCRIBE in the Subject heading and hit the Reply key.

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