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ABN # 65 648 097 123



Background Brief:

U.S.-Vietnam Need to Firm Up Comprehensive Partnership

May 12, 2022

Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh delivered a speech to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. on May 11 entitled, “Sincerity, Trust and Responsibility for a Better World.” As a first take, it would appear that analysts and pundits who predicted relations would be raised to a strategic partnership (or that Vietnam is the indispensable partner of the United States) will be disappointed.

Prime Minister Chinh mentioned U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership four times. The reference was guarded and implied that more work needs to be done before they could be raised formally to a higher level.

In his first reference, Prime Minister Chinh quoted from a letter by President Joe Biden in 2021 to Vietnam Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong that the U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership “is based on the foundation of respect, dignity, mutual respect, independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity.” Prime Minister Chinh stressed the importance of “sincerity, trust and responsibility” repeatedly in his speech.

In his second reference, Prime Minister Chinh invoked the authority of no less than Ho Chi Minh who expressed his desire to establish an “equal and comprehensive partnership” with the U.S. Prime Minister Chinh quoted from a letter written by Ho to the United States on February 16, 1946, “Our goal is complete independence and *comprehensive cooperation* with the United States (emphasis added).”

Prime Minister Chinh’s third reference was more pointed. After noting that the foundation of bilateral relations had been built up over three decades, “we need to be sincere, trustworthy, respectful and responsible” in overcoming the consequences of war. In order to bring the comprehensive partnership to “a stable, substantive, effective and in-depth development” there should be greater cooperation in “economics, trade, investment, science and technology, digital transformation, high-quality human resource training, combating climate change... and in solving international and regional issues.”

Additionally, Vietnam and the United States needed to look at three important areas of cooperation in the future: green growth, technological innovation and digital transformation, and diversification of supply chains.

Prime Minister Chinh’s fourth reference to comprehensive partnership noted that these factors made important contributions to resolving differences and

disagreements in the past and that led to the strong development of bilateral relations. Prime Minister Chinh expressed his belief that these factors would be key in “bringing the comprehensive partnership between Vietnam and the United States to a new, substantive and more effective level in coming years.”

Prime Minister Chinh noted that defence and security cooperation “continues to develop with concrete and practical results” under the Joint Vision Statement on Defence Cooperation issued in 2015 or seven years ago.

In sum, Prime Minister Chinh followed past precedent in calling for continued U.S. assistance in addressing war legacy issues or “healing the wounds of war” as the sine qua non in bilateral relations. Prime Minister Chinh also clearly flagged that Vietnam expected more from the United States across a wide range of sectors. Prime Minister Chinh’s discussion of the U.S.-Vietnam comprehensive partnership seemed to indicate that the time for raising bilateral relations to a strategic partnership had not yet arrived.

Suggested citation: Carlyle A. Thayer, “U.S.-Vietnam Need to Firm Up Comprehensive Partnership First,” *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, May 12, 2022. 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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