

Vietnam and the United States

Past as prologue

America partially lifts an arms embargo against a former foe

Oct 11th 2014 | DANANG AND HANOI | From the print edition

VIETNAM'S armed forces have looked busy these past few months. High above Danang, a city half-way down the country's long eastern coast that hosted American troops during the Vietnam war, military planes have been tearing about on training missions. Farther south, two brand-new submarines ply waters near the Cam Ranh Bay naval base once used by the Americans. The displays look like a rejoinder to China's recent assertiveness in the South China Sea.

The trouble started in May, when a Chinese state-owned energy company parked a large oil rig within Vietnam's claimed exclusive economic zone, near the Paracel islands, which Vietnam and China contest. Vietnam sent a fleet of fishing boats to confront the rig's flotilla of Chinese patrol boats. Vessels were rammed, and it was remarkable no one was killed. But back on land in Vietnam, the stand-off led to anti-Chinese protests and factory riots in which at least four people were killed. In mid-July the rig was towed back to near China's Hainan island, but many Vietnamese fear it will return when the hurricane season is over.

Since the rig's departure, the leaders of the Communist Party of Vietnam have tried to repair bruised relations with their mighty neighbour to the north. But they are also seeking support from other powers. In August senior officials from India, Japan and America all visited Vietnam's capital, Hanoi.

On October 2nd Vietnam's foreign minister, Pham Binh Minh, called on John Kerry. The American secretary of state told Mr Minh that the United States would partially ease its long-standing ban on sales of weapons to Vietnam. The embargo, in place since 1984, has persisted even as ties have warmed—Vietnam's record on human rights, after all, is dismal.

The partial easing of the embargo looks largely symbolic. Nine-tenths of Vietnam's arms purchases are from Russia, according to IHS Jane's, a consulting firm. But it may allow Vietnam to buy armed patrol boats, second-hand American spy planes and spare parts for

ancient military helicopters, which were captured from the Americans during the war and which it wants to refurbish. The desire seems to be to improve surveillance at sea.

America's easing of the embargo was not a complete surprise. It has gradually improved ties with Vietnam since the mid-1990s. The unlikely friends signed a bilateral trade deal in 2001. They are partners in the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a free-trade negotiation involving a dozen Pacific countries (though not China). And American energy firms are eager to supply equipment for a planned programme of civilian nuclear reactors.

An American diplomat says that Vietnam has made some progress in terms of its human-rights record, including the release this year of 11 prisoners of conscience. But a full lifting of the lethal-arms embargo, the diplomat says, would depend on "additional progress". That may be some way off. Yet Tuong Vu, a Vietnam expert at the University of Oregon, says the American shift is a "clear case" of strategic interests trumping human rights. Many dissidents remain behind bars, and the one-party state continues to arrest its critics under worryingly vague national-security laws.

Cu Huy Ha Vu, one of the political prisoners who was recently freed, is a Sorbonne-educated lawyer who was jailed in 2011 for, among other crimes, calling for multiparty government. After his release, Mr Ha Vu, the son of a revolutionary poet, flew directly to Washington, DC. He says he would one day like to see both a democratic Vietnam and a military alliance with America against Chinese expansionism. But, he adds, selling spy planes today, amid continuing domestic repression, only prolongs the regime's survival.

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