

US loosens arms embargo on Vietnam. Why now?

Vietnam has long called on the US to lift the decades-old embargo. The US will now provide some maritime equipment to strengthen Vietnam's coast guard, which clashed with China in May.

By Michael Holtz, Staff writer | OCTOBER 3, 2014

The United States has partially lifted a 40-year ban on lethal weapons to Vietnam, a move that comes at a tense time in the South China Sea.

The easing of the ban applies only to maritime equipment. But the decision reflects growing concern in Washington over China's rising assertiveness in the region as Beijing pushes its claims to resource-rich territorial waters and islands that other countries claim as well.

The move was announced Thursday as Secretary of State John Kerry met with Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh in Washington. Vietnam has long called on the US to lift the embargo.



Secretary of State John Kerry, joined by Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh, speaks to media at the State Department in Washington on Thursday. (Carolyn Kaster/AP)

The new policy is intended to strengthen Vietnam's coast guard, and would allow the country to receive armed boats and surveillance planes from the US, The New York Times reports.

It comes in the wake of one a heated exchange in May, when Beijing placed an oil rig near the Paracel Islands, an area in the South China Sea claimed by both Vietnam and China. The move sparked deadly riots in Vietnam that targeted Chinese and Taiwanese-owned factories.

The Christian Science Monitor's Beijing correspondent Peter Ford concluded that Beijing's tactics could backfire:

“ If Beijing's abrasive attitude pushes its neighbors to seek help from Washington, some analysts here are warning, it will mean only trouble for China.

Instead of ending up as the naturally dominant power surrounded by economically dependent smaller neighbors, China would find itself strategically isolated in the region and facing off directly with the US.

US officials denied the policy change toward Vietnam was directed against China, Al Jazeera reports. They insisted there were no specific sales outlined yet, and said such sales would be decided on a case-by-case basis.

The State Department said the decision to lift the ban, which was established after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, comes amid warming ties and modest improvements in Vietnam's human rights record.

But human rights organizations were quick to object. John Sifton, spokesman for Human Rights Watch, said that “Vietnam’s record on political prisoners is “bad and getting worse,” according to the Associated Press. Amnesty International said the country detains scores of people for exercising their right to freedom of expression.

While US officials warned that further easing of the ban would require additional progress on human rights, they said the policy shift was primarily driven by national security interests, the AP reports.

“ The State Department characterized Thursday’s move as part of a broader effort to help countries in the region boost their maritime security.

The U.S. says it has a national interest in peace and stability, and the diplomatic resolution of territorial disputes in the South China Sea, a major conduit for world trade.

About 40 percent of the world’s trade passes through the sea. Vietnam, Taiwan, Brunei, Malaysia, China, and the Philippines all claim regions of it.

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