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## Vietnam and America: Parameters of the Possible

FREDERICK Z. BROWN

In June 2008, the US media barely noticed that Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung made an official visit to Washington. But the event represented an extraordinary milestone in relations between the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Forty years after the Tet offensive, which changed the course of the Vietnam War and led to sociopolitical turmoil in the United States, here was US President George W. Bush proclaiming, in the visit's joint communiqué, “a positive, growing friendship [and] mutual respect” and pledging “support for Vietnam's national sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity.”

For Dung, who stood beside the president on the Rose Garden steps, this blunt expression of US policy was a welcome validation of the foreign policy that Vietnam has adopted since the end of the cold war. The statement also confirmed the connection with the United States as a geopolitical asset in the competition that the Vietnamese have long carried out with China. The consultation and measured cooperation that now characterize Vietnam-US relations are unprecedented.

To be sure, while the new relationship strengthens America's strategic position in Southeast Asia and has the potential to evolve further, this is not a marriage made in heaven. Conservative elements in the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) maintain misgivings about opening up to the United States. Some US foreign policy conservatives have their own misgivings about partnering with Vietnam, which is one of only five remaining communist nations in the world. And one wonders, given the Barack Obama administra-

tion's many pressing demands, whether adequate human and economic resources, along with political creativity, will be dedicated to making the bilateral relationship work.

Nonetheless, both Hanoi and Washington seem clear-eyed and realistic about the parameters of the possible, and this is what makes the new understanding between the United States and Vietnam singularly important.

### THE PATH TO NORMAL

Until the recent rapprochement, the United States had never had a “normal” relationship with Vietnam. Until 1945 the United States saw Vietnam—if Washington thought about the Vietnamese at all—through a European lens, and as a natural part of French Indochina. The Vietnamese were *les indigènes*, destined to be ruled by France. Franklin D. Roosevelt understood the brutal inequity of French colonialism but died before moving US policy in a new direction.

During the administration of John F. Kennedy, US involvement in Indochina began to slide down a slippery slope. What started with military advisers came to include Green Berets and then, under President Lyndon Johnson, big battalions. Finally this cold war entanglement cost 58,000 American lives and splintered US society.

The Republic of Vietnam's collapse and America's humiliating withdrawal in 1975 still haunt US foreign policy. Certainly, in discussions of Afghanistan today, the lessons of Vietnam—however they are defined—are never far away. Policy wonks in Washington still argue about how to formulate an effective counterinsurgency doctrine, carry out development and nation building in the absence of security, and balance an American military presence with the sensitivities of a local government.

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After 1945 American policy makers, caught up in the cold war, largely ignored a reality that was well understood by Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines when they formed the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—that despite the communist ideology shared by Vietnam and China, an inherent hostility between the two countries remained. This hostility was temporarily submerged during the cold war, because North Vietnam relied on China for assistance in its war against South Vietnam and the United States. But the tension was certain to reemerge, as indeed it did after 1975. ASEAN, based on its understanding of the Vietnam-China relationship, looked at the grand geopolitical shape of postwar Southeast Asia and saw that Vietnam would eventually be “plugged into the ASEAN grid.”

The administration of Jimmy Carter, perhaps taking account of ASEAN’s relatively spacious view of history, decided that American interests might be served by offering the Vietnamese a choice other than alignment with the Soviet Union or China. One of Carter’s first actions after coming into office was to probe Hanoi’s willingness to explore the establishment of diplomatic relations.

Normalization, however, turned out to be a complex, continuing process rather than a fixed destination. Initial American efforts at normalization were thwarted by Vietnam’s demand for “economic assistance to heal the wounds of war” (a code name for reparations). The process was then stalled by Vietnam’s 1978 invasion of Cambodia and America’s 1979 diplomatic recognition of the People’s Republic of China. In the 1980s, Vietnam was shunned internationally (except by the Soviet bloc) because of its invasion and long occupation of Cambodia.

After 1991, US-Vietnam relations improved because of Vietnam’s participation in a comprehensive political settlement bringing to a close conflict in Cambodia. Also critical to the improvement was Vietnam’s enhanced cooperation in determining the fate of American servicemen held captive during the war or listed as missing in action—the POW/MIA issue.

The Americans had long treated the POW/MIA question as a principal problem between the two sides. In fact, it had sometimes served as a vehicle for communication on other matters. It

allowed the two countries to remain in touch when, because of the impasse over Cambodia, there was not much else to talk about. POW/MIA negotiations provided a sort of music to accompany the mating dance of normalization. In April 1991, the United States laid out a “road map”—a series of quid pro quo steps regarding cooperation on Cambodia and POW/MIAs that would lead to a phased normalization of ties.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the time was ripe for change in the bilateral relationship. The end of the cold war shattered the status quo in Southeast Asia, and Hanoi had to admit that an improvement in relations with the United States would serve Vietnam’s national interests not only economically but also strategically—that is, regarding China, always Vietnam’s prime concern.

In February 1992, the US Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs declared that Vietnam had taken satisfactory measures to improve cooperation. In February 1994, many of the onerous conditions of the US trade embargo against Vietnam were lifted. Regionally, Hanoi no longer saw Vietnamese communism as the “vanguard of socialist transformation in Southeast Asia,” and accordingly signed the Bali Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 1992. In 1995 Vietnam became a member of ASEAN and relations with the United States were formally normalized. Vietnam, finally “plugged in,” now turned its attention to the vast problems embedded in its decaying Marxist economy.

## ALL ABOUT THE MONEY

Economic and commercial interests were the catalysts for improving bilateral relations between the United States and Vietnam, and they remain essential elements of the relationship today. In the 1980s and 1990s, companies such as Boeing, Caterpillar, General Electric, and Microsoft, along with major international banks and investment houses, brought pressure to bear on the US Congress and on several administrations to open up to Vietnam, in the hope of establishing a small but potentially lucrative new market in Asia.

The key event enabling commerce with the United States (indeed with the entire noncommunist world) came in December 1986, when the VCP’s Sixth Congress decided to junk Marxist

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economics in favor of *doi moi* (renovation), a decision that led to free market policies, decentralization, and broad administrative reforms. In 2001, the establishment of a US-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement facilitated a rapid increase in two-way trade. In 2006, the United States removed Vietnam from its list of “countries of particular concern” on grounds of religious freedom, and accorded it permanent normal trade relations. In 2007, with crucial support from the United States, Vietnam became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

By the end of 2008, two-way trade had reached \$15.2 billion (compared with \$.22 billion in 1994)—though the balance of trade runs heavily in Vietnam’s favor (\$12.5 billion of Vietnamese exports versus \$2.7 billion in US exports). Increasing the chances of yet greater commerce in the future, the two countries in 2007 signed a trade and investment framework agreement, which could lead to a free trade agreement. In terms of foreign direct investment, the United States ranks among the top five investors in Vietnam, if one includes investments made through American-controlled companies in Singapore and Thailand. Intel plans to invest approximately \$1 billion in a facility near Ho Chi Minh City. Many other US companies, both large and small, have invested or are planning to invest, assuming the economic environment remains stable.

The United States and Vietnam squabble over market access, intellectual property rights, the trade imbalance, and, especially, levels of Vietnamese exports (clothing, furniture, and seafood). The Vietnamese object to America’s “import monitoring programs,” which they claim violate the 2001 Bilateral Trade Agreement. In global commercial relations these days such differences are normal—but in US-Vietnam relations they sometimes carry political reverberations.

In any case, US-Vietnam trade is far exceeded by China-Vietnam trade, and this trade gives China an advantage over Vietnam in negotiations on a variety of issues. Both sides know that China, if it chose, could harm or even cripple sectors of Vietnam’s economy by dumping unfairly priced exports or undertaking other unfair trade practices. At the same time, the fact that Chinese companies have made large capital investments in

Vietnam tends to cool any Chinese desire to destabilize the economy for political purposes.

While Vietnam’s economic ascent since the 1990s has been impressive, continued progress is not a certainty. The 2008–2009 global economic downturn, and political divisions within the VCP, have slowed the process of institutional and procedural reform. And even if Vietnam continues its current growth pattern, decades will pass before its physical infrastructure, banking system, and general business environment will be truly modernized.

## LINKED TO THE WORLD

Yet Vietnam is now, for better or worse, linked to global economic conditions. When, for instance, international prices for oil and rice increase, Vietnam is affected—the country’s inflation rate stabilized at around 8 percent in 2009 after having risen to 24 percent in 2008. Similarly, because of Vietnam’s reliance on the US garment and footwear market, economic woes in the United States hinder Vietnamese economic growth. In 2008, amid the US downturn, Vietnam’s target for growth in gross domestic product was revised downward to 7.1 percent from 8.5 percent, and in 2009–2010 growth is expected to register about 6 percent.

Although commercial contacts have played a major role in strengthening the US-Vietnam relationship, US economic assistance has been an important element as well. Assistance to Vietnam by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) constitutes one of the largest USAID programs in Asia; in fiscal year 2009 it totaled \$103 million. Humanitarian assistance, including the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, accounts for more than three-quarters of this sum, but several other development programs have become very useful because they promote modernization of Vietnam’s society.

For example, the Support for Trade Acceleration and Reform program (STAR), created in September 1999, has helped Hanoi establish a sound regulatory framework for a market economy. STAR has worked with various entities under the Vietnamese government to enact comprehensive reform of laws and policies related to trade and investment, and to help Vietnam comply with WTO requirements. STAR has provided technical assistance in

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the drafting and approval stages of 100 new laws and in the implementation of regulations. It has also supported policy seminars and training workshops, domestic and international study tours, and special research projects.

The key to STAR's success is that it is driven by demand from the Vietnamese government, not by US prodding. According to USAID, the practical impact of STAR has been significant at the middle and lower levels of the Vietnamese bureaucracy. The program demonstrates that trust can be created between the two governments if they focus on micro-issues that concern both sides, and do so in a low-key, professional manner.

### STRATEGY AND ASYMMETRY

For strategic thinkers in Hanoi and Washington, the possibility of a mutually beneficial security relationship began to take shape in the 1990s. For the Vietnamese side, which is always fearful of "outside forces," this shift away from the communist-bloc arrangements of the cold war did not come easily. President Bill Clinton, in his July 1995 announcement recognizing the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, declared that normalization "will advance the

cause of freedom in Vietnam, just as it did in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union." In doing so, Clinton confirmed what VCP conservatives had argued all along—that the United States would try to use normalization and "peaceful evolution" as a means of undermining the party's political control.

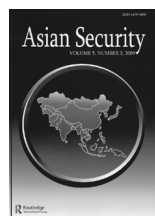
Nevertheless, contacts are proliferating. The 2008 Bush-Dung joint statement noted the need for "strengthening senior-level dialogue" and endorsed "the creation of new political-military and policy planning talks, which will allow for more frequent and in-depth discussions on security and strategic issues."

Since 2000, the US secretaries of state and defense and other cabinet-level officials have exchanged visits with their Vietnamese equivalents in Hanoi and Washington. US Navy vessels have since 2000 made port calls in Ho Chi Minh City, Hai Phong, and Da Nang. Officers of the US Pacific Command staff routinely exchange visits with their Vietnamese counterparts in Hanoi and Honolulu. US international arms traffic regulations regarding Vietnam have been modified to allow licenses for trade in certain nonlethal defense items and services.

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The Vietnamese military establishment has a long history of cooperation and training with the Soviet Union, and later Russia. Vietnam has agreed to purchase from Russia six Kilo-class submarines and twelve Su-30MK2 fighter jets, and already possesses a lot of less-modern Russian equipment. Among Vietnamese there is a residual sense of gratitude for Russian assistance during the war—as well as a deep-seated distrust of the US military and suspicion of “peaceful evolution.” The US side in all military-to-military matters must take into account such sentiments, even though the sentiments themselves may be abating as the perceived military threat from China shows no signs of diminishing.

Vietnam has had 2,000 years of experience dealing with China and is a master of the “politics of asymmetry.” University of Virginia political scientist Brantly Womack makes the essential point: “China is far more powerful than Vietnam, but it cannot easily force Vietnam to do what it wants simply because Vietnam’s motive for survival will surely be stronger than China’s motive for domination.” Vietnam, a large and clever “poisoned shrimp,” would be hard to digest.

## TOUGH LEGACIES

Issues created by the Vietnam War continue to influence relations between the United States and Vietnam. One obvious legacy is POW/MIAs, but another is the presence in the United States of a Vietnamese-American community, now in its second generation. Most in the community—certainly the younger generation, raised and educated in America and speaking English as a first language—feel robustly American. The community is 2 million strong and increasingly prosperous, and it plays an influential role in the bilateral relationship. Indeed, remittances to Vietnam total over \$2 billion per year officially, and in reality might be two or three times that amount.

A vocal minority of Vietnamese-Americans have the ear of Congress on human rights and religious freedom. They are highly critical of the Hanoi regime and call for an end to Vietnam’s one-party system. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese government has accused some Protestant groups in the Central Highlands of accepting external support to engage in “international terrorism.” The majority of Vietnamese-Americans have no interest in refighting the war. Nonetheless, Vietnamese-Americans as a whole remain attentive to what goes on across the Pacific.

Another legacy issue is Agent Orange, the air-sprayed defoliant containing dioxin that was used during the war in areas thought to be harboring Vietcong insurgents or units of the North Vietnamese army. Agent Orange, long neglected in the evolution of bilateral relations because of the Vietnamese government’s concerns about jeopardizing the normalization process, has become a contentious issue. Vietnamese public awareness of it has grown, and US scientific and humanitarian groups are exerting pressure on Washington to take remedial actions.

As a result, the Agent Orange problem is now receiving serious attention. In 2007, Congress appropriated \$3 million for “environmental remediation and health projects” in “hot spots” of environmental degradation such as the Da Nang airfield. That same year the Ford Foundation created a bilateral commission, the US-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin, to move discussions forward.

Dealing with legacy issues has become part of the fabric of normal diplomatic intercourse. Search missions for POW/MIAs, and related information exchanges, take place regularly. The recently reopened Orderly Departure Program addresses settlement in the United States of Vietnamese families separated by the war. In fact, incremental progress on legacy issues has contributed much to the maturation of the larger bilateral relationship.

Vietnamese society has developed along a track very dissimilar from America’s. The Vietnamese honor Confucianism and cherish a vivid revolutionary past that has reckoned with threats from larger foreign powers—China, France, the United States. “Struggle” is deeply engrained in the Vietnamese psyche. Vietnamese society values a strong authority structure built around discipline and the primacy of the group over the individual. Although Marxism has been largely discarded, a pronounced Leninist cast to Vietnamese political life remains. The regime places the need for stability at the top of its priority list. None of these tendencies will vanish overnight.

Religious freedom and, in a larger sense, human rights as people in the West conceive of them—freedom of expression, assembly, and religious practice—have put the US and Vietnamese governments at odds since well before formal relations began. It is worth noting that Vietnam’s 1992 constitution states that “the citizen shall enjoy

freedom of opinion and speech, freedom of the press, the right to be informed, and the right to assemble, form associations, and hold demonstrations *in accordance with the provisions of the law*” (emphasis added). The problem from the Western perspective, of course, is that the application of criminal law in Vietnam is quite often abusive, unjust, and designed primarily to protect the power of the VCP.

## CHURCH AND STATE

Issues of civilian and religious freedoms merge when religious practice takes on a political character. This occurs in public demonstrations, “incitement” from the pulpit, forced renunciation of individuals’ religious beliefs, or, in the case of the Catholic Church, disputes over real estate. The government recognizes only the Vietnam Buddhist Church and has attempted to suppress, sometimes violently, the Unified Buddhist Church, a church that existed mainly in the south before 1975 and that remains active.

The government’s repressive actions are a prime source of irritation among members of the US Congress and human rights groups. In 2004, the Bush administration placed Vietnam on its list of “countries of particular concern” over human rights violations. But in 2006, over the objections of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, the administration removed Vietnam from the list. This move recognized progress in Vietnam—the US Department of State has noted that Vietnamese who are religious can generally attend their chosen place of worship, whether Christian or Buddhist—but it was also an imperative condition allowing Bush to visit Hanoi.

During each session of Congress in recent years, legislation has been introduced to penalize Vietnam for abuses of religious or political rights. The most prominent bill is the Vietnam Human Rights Act of 2007, which would freeze non-humanitarian aid to Vietnam unless the government enacts certain changes in human rights policies and ceases abuse of dissidents. The House of Representatives has passed the bill, but to date the Senate has taken no action.

On the other hand, many observers believe Vietnam has been making incremental improve-

ments in its human rights record, at least as far as religious tolerance is concerned, and when compared with states still on the “countries of particular concern” list (China, Burma, Iran, and Pakistan, among others).

In early 2007, after Vietnam’s accession to the WTO, its security forces carried out a particularly brutal program of repression against dissident figures. A broad crackdown was instituted against individuals who had spoken out in favor of political liberalism or pluralism, including most prominently “Bloc 8406,” a diverse group of professionals—lawyers, medical doctors, army veterans, religious figures—who had signed an “Appeal for Freedom of Political Association.” After these events, the cancellation of a planned visit to Washington by President Nguyen Minh Triet was only narrowly averted.

In 2008, Vietnamese security forces launched a harsh campaign to further repress an already tightly controlled media. Whatever glimmers of objective or investigative reporting that existed previously in relatively liberal newspapers have disappeared. Severe restrictions have been placed on internet access and the blogosphere. In early 2010, four democracy activists, including a prominent human rights lawyer, were sentenced to long prison terms. Many other individuals who have openly expressed criticism of the government are already in jail.

Despite the US business community’s growing interest in investment and trade opportunities, it is safe to predict that religious freedom and civil rights will remain important factors in relations between America and Vietnam.

## HOW FAR?

For many of us who worked in South Vietnam during the war and who today enjoy good relations with Vietnamese who worked diligently and at great sacrifice for the communist victory in 1975, the new relationship with Vietnam has a poignant and bittersweet quality. At the same time, we can never forget the painful sacrifices of the Vietnamese whom the United States supported in a losing cause during the long war.

So how far can the US-Vietnam relationship go? What are the parameters of the possible? It

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is hazardous to predict Vietnam's future, but the essential elements of America's relationship with Vietnam are now quite well established, and it seems reasonable to offer a few suggestions about potential developments.

The year 2010 will be an intensely political one for Vietnam, ahead of a January 2011 Communist Party Congress and National Assembly elections to follow soon thereafter. The legitimacy of the Vietnamese government and the VCP is based largely on the performance of the Vietnamese economy. Yet corruption is deeply embedded in the system, and the VCP is at the heart of the problem. The party's top leadership cannot escape popular anger on this count. With political opposition forbidden, there is only the VCP to blame if things go wrong.

Thus, Dung's reappointment as prime minister is not automatic. In fact, we have no way to know the composition or inclinations of a future VCP Politburo. But whatever happens next year in Vietnam's political affairs, one thing is certain: It is not the United States' problem. America is no longer in the business of regime change in Vietnam.

Regardless of who is in power, Vietnam will probably remain for the foreseeable future a single-party, tightly controlled state under the VCP. Yet, normalization has brought relations to the point that Washington can deal in a businesslike fashion with whoever controls the government in Hanoi. What matters for the United States' long-range strategic interest is that Vietnam—as a country—succeeds, and that it does not descend into an economic depression, or worse.

Beyond the obvious long-term utility of maintaining and deepening the strategic dialogue, the United States shares other significant interests with Vietnam. Trade and investment remain essential, and both countries are constantly looking for ways to enhance this aspect of the relationship. But US and Vietnamese officials also discuss sensitive issues such as: coordination of information on international terrorism; measures to curb the illegal flow of narcotics and the trafficking of people; ways to combat environmental degradation, especially in the Mekong delta; and how to mitigate the harmful regional impact of unrestricted dam-building on the Mekong River. Meanwhile, hundreds of American nongovernmental organizations operate on the ground in Vietnam in a wide variety of humanitarian and civil society activities.

One could make the case that US-Vietnam relations are now about as normal as anyone could expect. To be sure, there is another side to the relationship. Vietnam has formed a bloc with Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar that makes it very difficult to place any ASEAN constraints on Myanmar's junta. Vietnam maintains good relations with Cuba, Venezuela, and North Korea, all of which are antagonistic to the United States. And the communist parties of China and Vietnam, despite acute national differences, are united in their determination to oppose pluralism and "peaceful evolution." None of this should grievously damage the US-Vietnam relationship—the countries have reached the point that they can agree to disagree.

Vietnam learned a lot during its recent two-year term as a member of the United Nations Security Council. The country has just assumed the chairmanship of ASEAN, and has the opportunity to assert its leadership in a constructive fashion. Obviously, Myanmar will be high on the list of tough problems facing Hanoi. It will be interesting to see what role Vietnam chooses to play.

## STRANGE WARMTH

For the United States, the key to sustaining the strategic relationship with Vietnam is to proceed in a manner that does not cause China to believe that an American-Vietnamese plot threatens China's national security. China will always be more important to Vietnam than is the United States—and China will always be more important to the United States than is Vietnam.

That said, the United States should, for instance, pursue its military-to-military dialogue with Vietnam as actively as the situation permits. As of early 2010, such dialogue appears to have hit a plateau. When the United States in 2003 was seeking partners in its war with Iraq, a senior Vietnamese diplomat observed that "Vietnam's vital interest is a peaceful environment for economic development. If this arrangement is in the mutual strategic interest of Vietnam and the United States, we will go along. If the United States says, 'You are either for us or against us,' then we will not go along." This view would seem to be a sound cautionary principle for Americans to bear in mind in building the strategic relationship.

Human rights advocacy and pressure exerted through Congress are legitimate representations of American principles and, if carefully used, can serve as a lever to advance US human rights policy.

An active human rights lobby that has access to Congress is a fact of life—but one that must be managed skillfully. The United States and Vietnam have resumed their human rights dialogue, and this is important. Nonetheless, the bilateral relationship should not be held hostage to human rights concerns. It would be an error to penalize Vietnam by placing restrictions on economic assistance or taking other steps that would damage commerce or the country's economic development. Such a move by Congress would give valuable ammunition to those in Vietnam who oppose bilateral cooperation.

Finally, it is in the realm of education that the United States has the greatest opportunity to build a positive, durable relationship between the Vietnamese and American peoples, and hopefully between the two governments. The Fulbright program, the Vietnam Education Foundation, and private foundations (Ford, Luce, and Gates, for example), along with a host of individual universities, are working to train thousands of Vietnamese students in the United States or in Vietnam itself. More than 13,000 Vietnamese now study in the United States, the majority in four-year universities.

During Prime Minister Dung's June 2008 visit to Washington, a bilateral task force on education was created, and the green light was given for an extraordinary joint effort to map out broad

changes in the Vietnamese tertiary education system. The task force in September 2009 issued a report. It lays out daunting problems that face expanded cooperation between Vietnamese and American institutions, not the least of which is the influence that the VCP holds over institutions of higher learning and on the ability of students to do independent research.

If increased cooperation with American educators is to be achieved, Vietnamese institutions must be able to operate with greater autonomy, accountability, and transparency. US institutions of higher education will not invest unless there is a reasonable assurance of a mutually beneficial partnership—which depends on a genuine Vietnamese commitment to reform and a somewhat greater degree of openness in the society.

Yet, despite the magnitude of such problems, this is an effort that America's government and higher education institutions ought to undertake in cooperation with the Vietnamese. Fortunately, both sides appear increasingly aware of the potential upside. Despite the legacy of war and profound differences in official perspectives, a strange warmth between the two societies has emerged. A modernized, highly educated Vietnam with a population that has intellectual space to improve further will be a friend of the United States and a positive force contributing to the stability of Southeast Asia. ■