

## **Vietnam Relations Are a Quiet U.S. Victory Already**

**There's no need to empower hard-liners by a potentially provocative upgrade.**

By **Brian Eyster**, the director of the Stimson Center's Southeast Asia Program.

Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh is making his first visit to the United States later this week for the U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit. Since the mid-1990s, when U.S. President Bill Clinton and a cohort of bipartisan allies reestablished relations with Vietnam, the two countries have achieved remarkable things. Hanoi is now one of Washington's top trading partners in the region, and the United States has invested billions of dollars in Agent Orange remediation and other remaining war legacy issues, showing how, with persistence and trust, former adversaries can turn into partners.

U.S. officials, including most recently U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam Marc Knapper, are calling for an official upgrade to a "strategic partnership" from the current status of "comprehensive partnership" to recognize the remarkable success of the relationship. In Hanoi, the label given to a bilateral relationship determines the number of bureaucratic and budgetary resources and frequency of official exchanges allocated to a partnership.

An upgrade to "strategic relationship" would augment resources dedicated to the effort and likely involve more defense-related activities, including the sale of U.S. military equipment to Vietnam now that a previous ban has been lifted. The upgrade can and should happen in good time, and indeed, the current collaboration on maritime security and maritime domain awareness capabilities suggests the United States and Vietnam enjoy a de facto strategic relationship. But pushing the upgrade during Chinh's visit could be counterproductive.

Hard-liners in Hanoi are jittery about the possibility, as they see it, of the United States using Vietnam to ratchet up great-power competition in mainland Southeast Asia. Some in Hanoi believe, despite 30 years of achievements, that U.S. core interests in Vietnam are to push for peaceful evolution leading to the eventual diminution of the Communist Party's role. Others in Hanoi aligned with China's strategic interests are pushing back on a strategic deepening of U.S.-Vietnam relations and suggesting a containment play by Washington. When these factions have reason to align, all forms of progress between the United States and Vietnam can slow.

By focusing on substance, U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinh can emphasize areas of agreement and mutual interest. They can also acknowledge recent areas of friction—including on the Russian invasion of Ukraine—while demonstrating that relations are now secure enough that these disagreements don't threaten to sap the momentum from growing ties.

There is much more substantive work to be done. Vietnam's economy is rapidly industrializing, and in a decade or two Vietnam could play a similar role to South Korea in its economic relationship with the world and the United States in particular. This is a future where Vietnam's firms are tightly woven into U.S. supply chains, its brands are globally recognized, and Vietnamese films are winning Oscars. Pitching a free trade agreement is not a politically realistic move given current sentiments in the United States, but when delegations meet in Washington, the two countries can aim for modest wins through the existing Trade and Investment Framework Agreement while embracing aspects of the forthcoming U.S. Indo-

Pacific economic framework, with a focus on secure supply chains and digital cooperation. These efforts would lay the foundation of a multistep process that could eventually result in a bilateral free trade agreement.

When Nguyen Phu Trong, the general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, visited the White House in 2015, he emphasized that war legacies cooperation formed the cornerstone of the bilateral relationship, outlining past success and articulating new needs. The United States continues to respond to war legacies needs with annual congressional funding allocations to efforts for Agent Orange remediation and services provided to the generations young and old that suffer from the spraying of dioxin.

U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy, in particular, has done heroic work on these issues for years. When he meets with Chinh at the Capitol, it will be important for future Senate champions of the effort, from both sides of the aisle, to be there shoulder to shoulder to demonstrate the sustained U.S. commitment to addressing war legacy issues. On the docket should be a shift in emphasis to the provision of direct assistance to victims of Agent Orange and collaboration on locating the remains of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese, in addition to Americans, killed in the conflict. Vietnam can also assist the United States in augmenting its effort to address these issues in neighboring Laos and Cambodia, building much-needed trust in countries historically close to Vietnam yet with prickly relations with the United States.

Cooperation on climate mitigation and adaptation is a new and highly promising frontier for U.S.-Vietnam relations. At last year's U.N. Climate Change Conference, Chinh made ambitious commitments to decarbonize by avoiding building new coal plants and transitioning toward clean energy. These goals cannot be reached without domestic reforms that open lanes wide for foreign investment in clean energy assets such as solar, wind, and liquefied natural gas.