

In China's Shadow, Communist Vietnam Links Arms With Old Enemy, the U.S.

Former foe to host visit by first American aircraft carrier since the war

By Jake Maxwell Watts

ABOARD THE USS CARL VINSON—A U.S. aircraft carrier will soon visit Vietnam, marking the highest point in the U.S.-Vietnam relationship in decades and a rare win for Washington as China expands its competing economic and military influence elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

Communist Vietnam is set to host the largest U.S. military presence on its soil since the 1970s when the USS Carl Vinson arrives in the coming days, the first postwar visit by a U.S. aircraft carrier.

The visit, arranged after a meeting in Vietnam between Presidents Donald Trump and Tran Dai Quang in November, signals their concern about China's presence in the South China Sea, a sea lane where Beijing has built artificial islands with runways and missile shelters.

Attempts to resolve competing claims to the waterway through diplomacy and international law have been eroded by China's warming relations with some countries. Most notable among those is the Philippines, which under President Rodrigo Duterte has set aside its dispute and befriended Beijing, winning billions of dollars in investment commitments and bruising its alliance with the U.S.

But Vietnam, which fought a war with China in 1979 and has a 2,000-mile coastline along the South China Sea, has sought to improve ties with Washington. The U.S. lifted a decades-old embargo on arms sales to Vietnam in late 2016 and last year donated a Coast Guard ship to Hanoi, which has asked for 18.

Among other gestures of friendship, Washington has channeled funds into removal of wartime toxins, while Vietnam has welcomed American warships to a refurbished naval base used by U.S. forces during the Vietnam War.

Economic ties are flourishing, with two-way trade doubling in five years to more than \$50 billion in 2017, according to data from both governments. The countries announced \$12 billion in commercial agreements when Mr. Trump visited in November.

"The visit gives Vietnam a hedge against China at a time when Beijing is assertive in pressing its claims in the South China Sea," said Murray Hiebert, a Southeast Asia expert at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Vietnam and the U.S. aren't an obvious pairing. The ideology of the ruling Communist Party clashes with Washington's embrace of capitalism, and Hanoi routinely imprisons its critics. In February, the State Department criticized the jailing of two political activists.

Vietnamese relations with China, meanwhile, have been strained. Anti-China riots rocked Vietnam in 2014 after Beijing moved an oil rig into disputed waters.

Several Southeast Asian countries share maritime disputes with China, which claims virtually the entire South China Sea. In the past year, China built more infrastructure on artificial islands in the disputed waters, including tunnels and radar installations, adding to runway and missile installations it completed earlier.

Vietnam has sought and failed to use regional forums like a biannual gathering of Southeast Asian leaders to pressure Beijing, one reason it has worked to upgrade relations with the U.S., said Carlyle Thayer, emeritus professor at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra.

Hanoi's foreign ministry didn't respond to a request for comment. Tran Cong Truc, a former official who consults for the Vietnamese government on defense issues, said the Carl Vinson's visit is part of a broader policy in Vietnam to improve relations with all countries, especially large powers.

Washington's relationships in Southeast Asia, meanwhile, are being tested as China expands its economic ties with smaller states such as Cambodia, Myanmar and the Philippines—often through promises of infrastructure loans.

The Trump administration's "America First" approach has also shaken some U.S. relationships in Asia. On taking office, Mr. Trump took the U.S. out of a Pacific trade pact that was seen as a counter to China's economic presence, and in which Vietnam stood to become one of the greatest beneficiaries.

In a policy document published in December, the administration sketched a new national-security strategy that depicts the world as one of heightened rivalries and potentially dangerous competition, especially from China.

That stance has further put Asian partners who are reluctant to choose sides on edge. "I think more than in any region, the sense of great power rivalry is pronounced in Southeast Asia," said Huong Le Thu, senior analyst at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

For the past two weeks, the Carl Vinson has steamed through the South China Sea, making a port call in Manila and welcoming media and officials on board to demonstrate U.S. commitment. **The carrier has about 4,500 personnel and 1,500 on accompanying escorts,** officials said.

Rear Adm. John Fuller, commander of the carrier strike group, said the Navy is committed to a role as a relationship-builder, through port visits and joint exercises. "It's what we do as the United States Navy," he said.