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High Hopes and New Realities for the Vietnam-US Relationship

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Hoang Anh Tuan, Director-General of the Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, explains that “Few can doubt after President Truong’s visit that both the United States and Vietnam are looking to further build on the foundation of bilateral trust already in place between the two countries.”

Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang’s visit to the United States at the end of July—his first trip to Washington, D.C., and only the second visit by a Vietnamese head of state since the two countries normalized relations in 1995—underscores the extent to which Vietnam’s foreign policy is becoming more and more proactive. Vietnam’s foreign policy activism with ASEAN members, the United States and other leading states is doing much to advance the agenda of the US “rebalancing strategy” towards the Asia-Pacific. Since Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung’s visit to Washington, D.C. in 2008, Vietnam has been at the helm pushing for a closer relationship with the United States; now formally acknowledged by both countries as a “Comprehensive Partnership.” Some have inaccurately argued that there has been a lull in the momentum of US-Vietnamese relations. In fact, several factors demonstrate that the opposite is the case.

First, since coming to office in 2009, President Obama has met frequently with either President Truong or Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung on the margins of regional forums or summits, including the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the East Asia Summit (EAS), the Nuclear Security Summit and the US-ASEAN Summit, among other venues. Moreover, high-ranking officials from both countries have maintained a regular schedule of visits, consultations and exchanges, including a visit to Vietnam in June 2012 by Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and a visit to the United States, also in June 2012, by Vice Chairwoman of the National Assembly Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan.

Second, the economic-commercial relationship between the two countries continues to develop rapidly. The United States is currently Vietnam’s seventh-largest investor with over \$10 billion invested in more than 600 projects. Although the world economy has yet to fully recover from the global financial crisis that began in 2008-09, bilateral trade in goods between the United States and Vietnam reached \$25 billion in 2012, making the United States the top export market for Vietnam. Additionally, approximately 17,000 Vietnamese students are currently studying at various educational institutions in the United States. In 2007-08, that number was less than 9,000. This makes Vietnamese students in the United States the largest student community of all Southeast Asian students pursuing degrees at US institutions. For the academic year 2011-12, Vietnam was ranked seventh as the country of origin for foreign students studying in the United States.

Third, the United States and Vietnam are slowly discovering their shared interests and strategic visions. In the words of President Truong Tan Sang, Vietnam regards

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the United States as “a top partner.” In return, the United States has consistently viewed Vietnam as an important actor within Southeast Asia. With regards to ongoing territorial disputes in the South China Sea, both countries have reaffirmed the shared value that all disagreements must be managed and settled peacefully on the basis of international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and both countries have vigorously rejected the use of force or the threat of force as a means of dealing with these conflicts. Furthermore, the two states have begun to communicate and work together in a constructive and productive manner in various regional institutions including APEC, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), EAS, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+).

Fourth, bilateral frameworks for dialogue and cooperation between Vietnam and the United States have been expanding in both quality and quantity. This, in turn, has greatly increased mutual understanding and diminished remaining differences over significant bilateral and regional issues. To date, the United States and Vietnam have established ten separate dialogue frameworks that include economics, politics, security and defense, and the development of a peaceful and prosperous Asia-Pacific region. There are even bilateral dialogues on issues such as democracy, human rights and religious freedom, topics once considered highly sensitive and virtually untouchable issues in the bilateral relationship.

Thus, US-Vietnam relations have matured and made great strides to the point that there are now a sufficient number of routine consultations, regular meetings, and other mechanisms from the working level to the highest levels of foreign, defense and security policies that the business of conducting bilateral relations is essentially self-sustaining. This relationship has evolved from an “abnormal” to a “normal” one, from one characterized by limited areas of cooperation to one marked by comprehensive cooperation across a number of spectrums.

During President Truong’s landmark visit, Vietnam and the United States agreed to establish a new framework for cooperation: a “Comprehensive Partnership” that will shape the bilateral relationship for the years to come. True to its name, the new framework covers a wide range of topics including cooperation in politics, diplomacy, economics and commerce, defense and security, and the promotion and protection of human rights. Importantly, Washington and Hanoi have agreed to the establishment of an annual foreign policy dialogue at the ministerial level—upgrading the existing agreement for regular consultations at the deputy foreign ministerial level.

The two sides have also agreed to an early conclusion to negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement, with the United States pledging to “take into account” Vietnam’s economic development status. Five economic agreements were signed during President Truong’s visit, of which three involve offshore oil exploration projects. On the sensitive and painful subject of war legacy issues, for the first time, the United States has agreed that extensive cooperation in addressing those issues helps to deepen mutual trust and allows both Vietnam and the United States to develop a relationship that looks to the future.

In summary, this visit has showcased a willingness from both Vietnam and the United States to set aside the past and look forward to a future relationship built solely upon shared interests and common concerns, free from the influence of a third party. This willingness also reflects Vietnam’s genuine determination to work towards the goal of building “strategic trust,” as very clearly propounded by Prime Minister Nguyen in his keynote speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue last May. Few can doubt after President Truong’s visit that both the United States and Vietnam are looking to further build on the foundation of bilateral trust already in place between the two countries.

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