

For the US and Vietnam, a moral and strategic imperative
by Zach Przystup

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Vietnam will start the new year with a bang. Next month, its Communist Party (CPV) will hold a [momentous 12th National Congress](#) and reshuffle its [top three positions](#) of party chief, president, and prime minister. In foreign policy, their priority will be deciding whether to hew closer to the United States or China. Lately, China's Pacific power grab has inspired a renaissance in US-Vietnam relations. For the US, sustaining this trend will require a more complete reconciliation over its tragic history with Vietnam.

Recent progress in US-Vietnam relations has been encouraging. A summer trip to the White House by Nguyen Phu Trong, head of the CPV, signaled how their economic and security interests are converging.

Vietnam is already the largest US trading partner in Southeast Asia; once ratified, the Trans-Pacific Partnership should further [boost](#) economic ties. In the South China Sea, Washington and Hanoi both cast a wary eye on Beijing's Great Sandcastles. It is no coincidence that the US has pledged closer maritime cooperation and temporarily lifted a ban on the sale of lethal weapons to Vietnam.

Yet for all their shared interests, relations are not all they could be. In the US, human rights issues and the prospect of befriending a communist country are unresolved concerns, while some in the CPV fret that Washington seeks a changing of the guard in Hanoi. Above all, the war legacy haunts both sides. Converging geopolitical interests matter, but a more complete reconciliation over that great human tragedy is essential to realizing the full potential of US-Vietnam relations.

The US has been remiss in fully addressing its own legacy in Vietnam. As Hoang Binh Quan, chairman of Vietnam's Commission for External Relations, [noted](#) before Trong's trip to Washington, "Thousands of Vietnamese still suffer from the lingering effects of Agent Orange and bombs and mines left over from the war. For Vietnam – both the people and the government – a responsible gesture by the United States to help heal this war wound would go quite far."

It's a reasonable request. During the war, the US sprayed [11-12 million gallons](#) of Agent Orange, a toxic herbicide, over southern Vietnam – an area the size of Massachusetts – to deny jungle cover to communist fighters. The results are still devastating. Due to exposure to Agent Orange, an estimated [3 million Vietnamese](#), including 150,000

children, have developed a laundry list of debilitating diseases and some of the most chilling birth defects imaginable. In many cases, these have been passed down through generations of families. That has made it hard to forgive and forget.

America has not made the task any easier. It has [set aside](#) \$13.4 billion to compensate 250,000 of its veterans for 33 illnesses and birth defects related to Agent Orange exposure. Presumably that is because it believes Agent Orange was harmful. Yet for Vietnamese victims – the actual targets of Agent Orange – it has cited a lack of medical evidence and legal liability to avoid taking similar measures.

A more appropriate response would be along the lines of the Aspen Institute's recommendation for a 10-year, \$450 million program, with \$150 million given to clean Agent Orange hotspots – an effort that is underway at Da Nang airport – and \$300 million to provide health-related services to Agent Orange victims. For the US, carrying forward such a comprehensive program would be a courageous, necessary, and strategic step toward reconciliation and closer relations with Vietnam.

Announced in advance of Vietnam's upcoming party congress, such a commitment would build on recent momentum and give the Politburo reason to believe that Washington will be a more steadfast partner than Beijing. This could help orient Vietnam's new leadership and foreign policy towards Washington, and vice versa, bolstering the US pivot to Asia and alleviating Vietnam's overdependence on China. One shouldn't need a geopolitical argument to advance a compelling moral cause, but it doesn't hurt when the two converge.

Human rights issues are not to be downplayed, but Washington should recognize the difficulty of transforming Vietnam to its own liking. Moreover, with a quarter of Vietnam's population under the age of 15, nearly half [online](#), and [16,500 studying in the US](#), the country's dynamic youth – not Washington – will determine its future.

Addressing the legacy of Agent Orange would be a strategic investment in goodwill with this cohort. The US would be wise to align policy with its strategic interests in Asia and the future leaders of Vietnam.

While commemorating the 20th anniversary of US-Vietnam relations, Secretary of State John Kerry [conceded](#) that the war "stemmed from the most profound failure of diplomatic insight and political vision." With a bit of both, the US can right its wrongs and write a new future with Vietnam. Morally and strategically, that is the right way forward.

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