



The bilateral and regional significance of Obama's visit in Vietnam by Huong Le Thu

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“Please take from me the token of trust so that we can embark on a hundred-year journey together” said President Barack Obama, citing Nguyen Du, Vietnam’s most important poet, in Hanoi last month to 2,000 enthusiastic Vietnamese. He encouraged the Vietnamese government to accept different political views, advocated the empowerment of women and youth, and tapped onto a national spirit with the claim that big states should not bully smaller ones. From that inspirational speech to the meeting with young entrepreneurs or eating bun cha in the Hanoi local eatery, Obama conquered hearts. His visit to Vietnam, aimed at boosting bilateral relations, strengthening the foundation for the next administration and building strategic trust, was a success. In fact, US-Vietnam relations under his presidency can be said to be the best ever. Years ago, it would have been hard for anyone to imagine the US president smiling and shaking hands with Hanoi’s communist leadership in front of Ho Chi Minh’s statue and that the people would wait in the streets for hours, under the hot sun or pouring rain, to greet Obama.

Each city that Obama visited, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) between May 23-25, represented different facets of bilateral ties. The first destination – the nation’s capital – marked the new heights of the relationship as Obama met Vietnam’s new top leadership (President Tran Dai Quang, National Assembly Chairwoman Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, and Party Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong, who he met last year in Washington) and addressed important maritime security, defense, diplomatic, and trade issues. In HCMC, the less formal part, Obama focused on engaging with the young and the business community.

Momentum for bilateral ties

The visit’s importance can be seen at two levels: bilateral and regional. The center of media attention was the lifting of the lethal weapon embargo – a decision hailed as a milestone in the path toward closure of the painful war history. The [symbolic meaning](#) of the lifting of the embargo consolidates trust, a necessary component to opening doors for further security cooperation and paving the way to upgrading the 2013 comprehensive partnership to a strategic one. Additionally, Washington has pledged to provide Vietnam with [18 patrol boats](#) and Vietnam will receive assistance from the Department of Defense’s Cooperative Threat Reduction Program and Maritime Security Initiative (MSI) funding, a

regional initiative for which the US has committed \$425 million over five years. For Vietnam, which has called for relaxation of the embargo for years, the decision has four levels of meaning: it symbolizes the full normalization of ties with the US; it means Vietnam has achieved ‘full’ internationalization by leaving the ‘black list’; it provides Hanoi an alternative in seeking defense measures amid China’s aggressive posture in the South China Sea; and it promises an upgrade and modernization of defense techniques and training, not only for self-defense purposes but is also beneficial for [Vietnam’s first engagement in UN peacekeeping forces](#) by 2017.

Economically, since the normalization of ties in 1995, two-way trade grew nearly 100 times, expanding between 2010 and 2015 from \$18.5 billion to \$45 billion. Vietnam is already the biggest Southeast Asian exporter to the US market. Along with security and defense cooperation, the two governments reaffirmed [joint efforts](#) to strengthen cooperation in education, public health, and the environment, particularly in mitigating the crisis in the lower Mekong basin. Among the agreements reached was an order by VietJet, Vietnam’s budget airline, for 100 Boeing planes worth \$11.3 billion in sales. At a press conference, Obama confirmed the US commitment to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and his belief that it will be ratified because “[it’s a right thing to do.](#)” Should TPP be implemented, economic ties between the two countries will be further integrated. TPP also brings a promise of reform of Vietnam’s economic system and a diversification from dependency on China.

Vietnam’s new position in the region

At the regional level, although still subject to case-by-case consideration, Washington’s decision allows Vietnam to build its clout. Obama’s decision amid China’s militarization of the South China Sea sends a strong signal to the region. Obama denied at a May 23 press conference, held with Vietnamese counterpart Tran Dai Quang that the decision was about China; instead, he said, it reflected maturity of US-Vietnam bilateral ties. He did address shared concerns about maritime security, reiterating points about the importance of freedom of navigation and a rule-based approach to the resolution of disputes in the South China Sea.

The US rebalance to Asia has elevated Vietnam’s regional importance since 2010, when Hillary Clinton announced the concept of the ‘pivot to Asia’ in Hanoi at the ASEAN Regional Forum. In this light, permitting arms sales to Hanoi is consistent with, rather than a departure from, US Asia policy. Vietnam may soon become one of the more important US regional security partners. In the current political environment in Southeast Asian, many leaders pay decreasing importance to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The recent [four-point consensus](#) reached by China,

Laos, Cambodia, and Brunei, questions the ability, or willingness, of the 10 Southeast Asian states to work together. And if the Philippines, the other most active claimant in the region, plans to ‘take a step back’ in a South China policy under new president [Rodrigo Duterte](#), Vietnam’s political stability promises much needed consistency in its approach to China and maritime disputes. Washington recognizes the importance of having a stronger stand in Southeast Asia and supports Hanoi’s resistance to China’s coercion.

While Obama’s charm offensive was effective and the Vietnamese still suffer from ‘[Obama fever](#),’ the Hanoi leadership is vigilantly watching [Beijing’s reaction](#). Excitement about the new heights of ties with Washington will not replace Hanoi’s careful assessment of how not to provoke its [big neighbor](#). Despite the optimism about Vietnam-US relations, there remain questions whether China – a key factor in warming bilateral relations – is sufficient for a lasting friendship.

A long journey ahead

During his visit, President Obama faced the double challenge of improving relations with the Vietnamese government while not ignoring the voices of Vietnamese civil society. As [some prominent dissidents](#) were prevented from meeting the president, human rights issues were said to receive [insufficient attention](#). His decision to lift the arms embargo has been criticized by human rights groups for prioritizing strategic and economic benefits. The timing was also awkward given recent protests in Vietnam caused by massive fish poisoning and the government’s lack of response and transparency.

But Obama’s speech, which quoted the venerable Thinh Nhat Hanh who said “In true dialogue, both sides listen,” invites a more constructive explanation. His decision shows that the US has learned by interacting with Southeast Asian states. The human rights and democracy narrative is less favorably received in Southeast Asia, particularly when China’s presence in the region intensifies and with no such ‘conditionality.’ Some even argue that Washington’s adherence to those norms have cost it standing in Southeast Asia, compared with China. With the [economic embargo being lightened in Myanmar](#) and Vietnam’s arms embargo being lifted, the Obama administration has ‘socialized’ the idea that criticism in ASEAN region can be perceived as interference. In fact, sanctions and embargoes long in place have not proved successful in pressuring Vietnam’s government to improve its human rights record. Stronger engagement with diverse groups, through different channels, be they economic ties like TPP or education exchange [like Peace Corps](#), can be more effective. Judging from the enthusiastic embrace of Obama and the qualities he represents, the mood for change is strong in Vietnam.

In the second leg of his visit, President Obama travelled to Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon. Once shattered by war, it is now bustling with business and entrepreneurship, Obama met civil society representatives and members of the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSALI). He seemed to make a point to share time equally between officials and the people.

After visiting HCMC, Obama went to Japan to be first the US President to visit Hiroshima, more proof that the US has an ability to [turn haunting past conflicts into meaningful partnerships](#). With the normalization with Cuba and the lifting of the arms embargo on Vietnam, Obama leaves a legacy of historic reconciliation that pushes US foreign policy beyond ideology. The current trajectory of US-Vietnam ties is at optimal momentum; deepening trade and economic linkages set a strong foundation for long-term relations that can survive ad hoc geopolitical shifts. If generational change is unavoidable, then President Obama seems successful in securing that token of trust from Vietnam’s young generation.

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