

Vietnam's President Visiting the White House to Talk Strategy by Murray Hiebert & Phoebe De Padua

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President Barack Obama is scheduled to host Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang at the White House on July 25. Sang's first-ever visit to Washington will provide a platform for the leaders to explore closer cooperation between the two historically linked countries.

Within ASEAN, Vietnam may be the country most focused on geostrategic balancing. Given its proximity to, history with, and unique understanding of China, Vietnam has become one of the region's most effective proponents for strengthening relations, building institutions, and convincing China to emerge as a regional power with respect for its neighbors.

While it thinks regionally, Vietnam itself is evolving politically. Sang's visit comes at a particularly critical time at home. The government is struggling with how to allow more political space for its citizens, who have become empowered through the economic benefits of its reform efforts. Vietnam expert Jonathan London of City University of Hong Kong points out that over the past six months, a much more vibrant and open political debate has emerged in the country on issues such as revising the constitution. The Communist Party of Vietnam has allowed higher levels of access to government decision-making and accountability, including allowing National Assembly members to evaluate the performance of top government leaders.

Much of this debate has played out in a dynamic blogosphere at the same time that more Vietnamese bloggers are being arrested. Interestingly, this debate has emerged at a time when the domestic economy has slowed and conflicts within the ruling party have burst into the open.

Despite these complications at home, and in part because of them, Vietnam's leaders have launched a diplomatic offensive of sorts in recent months. Sang is coming to Washington shortly after visits to Beijing to meet with the new Chinese leadership and to Indonesia to sign a strategic partnership agreement. The Vietnamese president's meeting with Obama will come less than two months after Sang's political rival, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, made what London calls "an unusually effective presentation of Vietnamese views on the international stage" when he delivered a keynote speech on regional security at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in early June.

Vietnamese leaders competing for good ideas and leadership profile is not a bad thing for the country's partners, including the United States. The Obama administration came into office in 2009 looking to rebalance the focus of US foreign policy toward a more broadly defined Indo-Pacific region with Southeast Asia at its core. As part of that effort, it proposed discussing a strategic partnership with Vietnam. But that strategic partnership never quite took off.

Conservative factions in Vietnam appeared reluctant to go too far too fast with the United States out of concerns about irritating China, a country with which Vietnam's Communist Party and military enjoy long-standing but often tense ties. In Washington, Congress put increasing pressure on the administration to address human rights violations in Vietnam, which worsened at the same time that nearby Myanmar's dramatic political reforms were garnering increasing attention in Washington.

Sang's arrival will give both sides an opportunity to recalibrate the bilateral relationship. It is not clear if the two partners believe this is the right time to resurrect the strategic partnership, but the discussion is expected to be comprehensive, covering economic and trade relations, political and security issues, and people-to-people ties.

For Vietnam, the visit will offer an opportunity to pursue issues like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), enhancing military-to-military ties, and a discussion of security issues in Asia, particularly in the disputed South China Sea where both China and Vietnam are claimants.

For the United States, the visit will provide a chance to discuss its concerns on human rights and religious freedom. These issues, once a one-way discussion, have become more interactive, according to officials on both sides. That sadly has not eradicated the issues causing concern, but a foundation for mutual respect and consideration is starting to be established.

"Human rights should be part [of a larger US] strategy, but should not become the focal point that impedes progress in other areas," argues Carlyle Thayer, a leading scholar on Vietnam at the Australia Defence Force Academy.

Bilateral relations between the United States and Vietnam have improved dramatically since normalization 17 years ago. The two countries now enjoy strong two-way trade, which reached \$25 billion in 2012 (with the United States suffering a trade deficit of almost \$16 billion), and they are partners in the 12-nation TPP trade agreement negotiations. Strong people-to-people ties have developed, with Vietnam now the eighth-largest provider of foreign students to US schools.

A robust economic partnership is the linchpin of strong US-Vietnam relations. Washington pushed hard to include Vietnam, one of the least developed countries negotiating the TPP, in the agreement. Vietnam signed on because officials

thought it would speed up the country's integration into the global market and accelerate domestic economic reform. Many analysts believe that Vietnam stands to be one of the biggest winners from the TPP.

During his visit, Sang will look for a signal from the US president that the United States will provide increased market access to Vietnam's booming garment industry, a key condition for Hanoi agreeing to other TPP provisions. Some TPP negotiating partners are quietly urging the United States to give this issue more consideration, as it is fundamental for Vietnam to participate in an agreement that could completely reorder its laws and its approach to commercial engagement with partners in the TPP.

Washington, on the other hand, will look for a commitment from Vietnam that it will level the playing field for competition with its state-owned enterprises and do more to protect intellectual property rights. Obama can also be expected to offer Vietnam technical assistance to address the broad range of new trade and investment issues the country will confront in the TPP.

The South China Sea dispute is another hot topic that will be discussed in the meeting. Both presidents can be expected to endorse efforts between ASEAN countries and China to negotiate a code of conduct to avoid accidental conflicts in the South China Sea.

Thayer recommends that the United States consider ways to assist Vietnam in raising maritime domain awareness through the sale of coastal radar technology, supporting aerial surveillance, and promoting cooperation between the US Coast Guard and Vietnam's Marine Police.

On military-to-military relations, Vietnam has been focused but careful, based on its concern that cooperation with the United States could complicate relations with China. Nonetheless, there could be a thaw in the air with the recent meeting in Washington between Vietnam's chief of the General Staff, Senior Lt. Gen. Do Ba Ty, and the US chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin Dempsey.

To follow up on the general's visit, Thayer suggests that Washington consider offering Vietnamese officers more fellowships at US national defense establishments and fund Vietnam's participation in international seminars and conferences of interest to both countries. Washington has earlier offered to assist Vietnam with its commitment to increase its involvement in international peacekeeping.

Both Vietnam and the United States recognize that it is in their strategic interests to maintain close relations. Sang's visit will reaffirm that shared belief and set the stage for a more enhanced US-Vietnam partnership in the decade ahead.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.