

A historic visit to the United States by Lai Thai Binh

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The visit of Nguyen Phu Trong, general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, to the United States on July 7-10 not only confirms the progress of Vietnam-US relations in the past 20 years, but also has important implications for the development of this relationship, given vibrant movements of regional and international relations now and in the future.

First, the Asia-Pacific region continues to experience dynamic developments, in particular the strengthening of cooperation among countries to deal with common challenges in many fields. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is reaching the final stage of negotiations. At the same time, tensions in the South China Sea and the Korean Peninsula continue to hinder efforts to promote unity and cooperation in the region.

Second, in 2015 Vietnam and the United States commemorate the 20th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations. With efforts by both sides, the relationship between the two countries has gradually developed into a positive and active one bilaterally, regionally, and multilaterally. Trade relations between the two countries achieved growth of approximately 20 percent annually and Vietnam has become one of the leading economic partners of the US in the region. Cooperation in other areas has also been advanced, though there are problems that demand active cooperation from the two sides to solve.

Third, it is time for the administration of President Barack Obama to reach a final agreement on the nuclear program of Iran and establish diplomatic relations with Cuba while continuing to “rebalance” to Asia. Meanwhile, Vietnam is actively preparing to hold the XII Congress of the Party while promoting international integration and enhancing cooperation with the region and the world.

The visit of General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong has many implications and positive effects for Vietnam-US relations.

First, the visit deepens the framework for the relationship by further identifying areas of cooperation and showing both sides’ political will to push forward bilateral relations. After nearly 20 years of diplomatic relations, in July 2013, the two countries officially established a Comprehensive Partnership with nine priority areas of cooperation. The visit of the general secretary to the US consolidates this framework by further specifying areas of cooperation by confirming results already achieved, proposed developments in the next direction, going deeper into aspects that the two sides should take note of, and proposing principles for healthy, normal, and positive relations between Vietnam and the US in the new context. The trip also

expressed the political determination of Vietnam to continue active cooperation with the United States to stabilize and develop new depth and substance in this bilateral relationship. The US also expressed awareness of the increasing importance of Vietnam in the region as well as identified US interests in strengthening ties with Vietnam and promoting the “rebalance” in the Asia-Pacific.

Second, the visit helps to reinforce existing cooperation between the two countries by promoting political/diplomatic relations and paving the way for more specific relations to develop. After 20 years of diplomatic relations, Vietnam-US relations have been progressing, especially in the economic-trade sphere (two-way trade in 2014 exceeded \$36 billion), science-technology (two sides signed an agreement on civil nuclear cooperation for peaceful purposes in May 2014), culture-education (there are about 16,500 Vietnamese students studying in the US, making Vietnam 8th among countries with students studying in the US). However, Vietnam-US relations still face many barriers such as differences in economic development, differences in political systems, and the complexity of US domestic politics. The visit promoted political relations/diplomacy between the two countries, creating favorable conditions to extend cooperation to more substantive levels. The visit also shows that priority areas of cooperation (economic/commercial, scientific/technological, cultural/educational relations...) can continue with prospects of rapid and positive developments.

Third, the visit positively contributes to cooperation in areas where the two countries disagree. Despite the positive and quick development of Vietnam-US relations, frictions and disagreements continue in some areas, mainly in the field of democracy, human rights and freedom of religion because of differences in values, perceptions, and the sabotage of hostile forces. To solve these problems, both sides must show regular, continuous consideration to the other’s stance. With this visit, both sides can hope that trust will be strengthened and enhanced, creating favorable conditions for resolving these disagreements. For example, on the issue of human rights, the two countries in their Joint Statement confirm continued support for the promotion and protection of human rights and say that they will maintain positive, frank, and constructive dialogue on human rights to enhance mutual understanding and narrow differences.

Fourth, the visit helps to broaden bilateral relations to new areas of cooperation. The US visit by Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong promotes the expansion of Vietnam-US relations in at least two respects. First, with the spirit of “putting aside the past, looking toward the future,” the two sides will expand and deepen relations in fields that fit the specific needs of both countries. Second, the Declaration of Common Vision and its contents identifies specific areas to expand bilateral cooperation, such as a commitment to carry

out reform to meet the high standards of the TPP, a memorandum on peacekeeping cooperation, and a license to conduct the first Fulbright University in Vietnam, among others. This new partnership helps Vietnam-US relations become more “comprehensive.”

Fifth, the visit allows Vietnam-US relations to contribute to peace, stability, and developments in the Asia-Pacific region and around the world. In addition to nontraditional security, which has emerged as an important concern in the past two decades, the South China Sea and regional security architecture command international attention. As an active and responsible member of ASEAN and the international community, Vietnam seeks to contribute to the stability and development of the region. Meanwhile, as a global power, the United States plays an important role in ensuring regional stability. During the visit, the two sides exchanged views frankly about concerns and commitments related to cooperation in the TPP framework, the joint promotion of solutions to the problem of the South China Sea, mechanisms for strengthening stability and development in the Asia-Pacific region, and the strategic partnership between ASEAN and the US, among others. The visit has elevated the role of regional strategic interests within the Vietnam-US Comprehensive Partnership.

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