

# Twenty Years of Diplomatic Relations with Vietnam - And What Comes Next

*Ted Osius*

United States Ambassador to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam is an opportunity to further deepen our two countries' Comprehensive Partnership. In January, Vice Foreign Minister Ha Kim Ngoc opened a conference in Hanoi marking this milestone anniversary by exhorting us to move beyond bilateral cooperation to regional and global collaboration, especially in the fields of nonproliferation and climate, as well as water, food, and energy security. He is right. The stated goal of our Comprehensive Partnership is to contribute to peace, stability, cooperation, and prosperity in each country, in the region, and in the world. The recent history of US partnerships with India and Indonesia teaches us that moving beyond bilateral engagement to broader cooperation is necessary and healthy for maturing relationships.<sup>1</sup>

In their joint statement in July 2013, Presidents Obama and Sang identified nine areas ripe for collaboration. Below I will note progress in each area and identify opportunities for joint activity in the future.

## Political and Diplomatic Cooperation

Since 2013, the two governments have rapidly accelerated the tempo of high-level visits; more are expected this year. Our dialogue has grown richer and more frank, and for several years Vietnam and the United States have worked together more effectively in regional fora. As the United States, Vietnam, and other countries continue developing the Lower Mekong Initiative, we have proven that we share key objectives.

Vice Minister Ngoc also urged the United States and Vietnam to work together to support a stable international system and international law. Both countries view challenges to the status quo in the South China Sea through a similar lens, wishing to use diplomacy, international legal mechanisms, and capacity building in the maritime realm to deter aggression and unilateral action in waters through which half of the world's seaborne cargo passes. We have begun to work together at the United Nations—even in the United Nations Human Rights Council—although our voting records continue to reflect serious disagreement on some important issues. Party-to-party ties are strengthening, including high-level visits in both directions this year. A key goal for the future is to build common understanding on a number of issues with the Ministries of National Defense and Public Security. Soon, we expect to conclude negotiations on a New Embassy Compound, enabling us to build a safe chancery that reflects the growing importance of our relationship.

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<sup>1</sup> "Global Swing States: Deepening Partnerships with India and Indonesia," *Asia Policy*, January 2014.

## Trade and Economic Ties

Annual trade volume increased from less than \$500 million to \$35 billion in 20 years of normalized relations, although growth in US imports of Vietnamese goods has been faster than growth of our exports to Vietnam. Now that we are in the end game of negotiations over the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), we can anticipate that Vietnam's participation in this high-standard trade and comprehensive agreement will lead to significant changes in management of the economy and new trade and investment opportunities as barriers fall. With Vietnam in TPP, and with its continued progress toward greater transparency and respect for rule of law, the United States could become Vietnam's number one investor, as it is in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as a whole.

Thanks to commitment from the Civil Aviation Authority of Vietnam, we are making progress toward achieving Category One status, a necessary condition for direct flights between our two countries. The United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) Governance for Inclusive Growth program helps Vietnam advance an economic reform agenda that will benefit the relationship, as well as investors, regional trade, and Vietnam's people. Major opportunities exist for trade and investment expansion of Vietnam's infrastructure, in its rapidly growing aviation sector, and in clean energy. A troubling impediment to this growth in economic ties will be Vietnamese visa restrictions. While China now issues ten-year, multiple-entry visas, Vietnam has moved in the opposite direction and restricts visitors to three months and a single entry.

## Science and Technology Cooperation

For 14 years the US-Vietnam Joint Commission on Science and Technology has coordinated and promoted cooperation, much of it involving academic institutions. A crowning achievement was the conclusion of a 123 Agreement on civil-nuclear energy. The agreement sets the stage for closer civil nuclear cooperation for decades while also strengthening our nonproliferation commitments. At the same time, we celebrate a growing number of collaborative scientific activities supported by the Partnerships for Enhanced Engagement in Research program.

Our partnership on climate change adaption and mitigation is also deepening. USAID is implementing a substantial Forests and Deltas program to help Vietnam adapt to rising sea levels and adopt more sustainable land use practices. The United States has offered to assist Vietnam to develop its Intended Nationally Determined Contribution to the global fight against climate change. Vietnam recently proposed collaboration with the United States in food security and nutrition, especially in the Mekong Delta. Together we should explore the food security implications of Vietnam's vulnerability to climate change and what it will mean for the region and beyond. Bilateral space collaboration, which enhances telecommunications, climate work, maritime domain awareness, and disaster prediction, is also an exciting avenue for further collaboration.

## Environment and Health

We are working with Vietnamese law enforcement agencies to combat wildlife trafficking, and have partnered with local authorities, businesses, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to build an alliance to preserve Ha Long Bay, a UNESCO world heritage site threatened by multi-source pollution. Working with Vietnam's Ministry for Planning and Investment and the United Nations Development Program, the United States will partner with Vietnam as it implements its Green Growth Strategy and sets the country on a path of lower emissions development. The Lower Mekong Initiative gives us an opportunity to deepen collaboration on water issues.

In the field of health, the United States has invested nearly \$700 million through the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. Vietnam has also become a focus country for the President's Global Health Security Agenda, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention continues to work closely with Vietnam to help prevent the spread of Ebola. After successfully weathering SARS and avian flu, Vietnam is preparing for the next epidemic. The Minister of Health and I inaugurated an Emergency Operations Center that links Hanoi to four other regions and will serve as a War Room for communicating about infectious disease outbreaks. In the future, the United States and Vietnam could collaborate on combating tuberculosis and drug-resistant malaria. The United States' long record of support for persons with disabilities—in terms of health, education, and legal protection—began before the normalization of diplomatic relations and continues, with strong congressional support, to offer compelling opportunities for engagement.

## Education Cooperation

Through our Fulbright exchanges, over 1,000 students and scholars from our two countries have promoted closer education cooperation and deeper understanding through study, research, or teaching in one another's country. The Fulbright Economic Teaching Program (FETP) just celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> year transforming the way economics and public policy are taught in Vietnam. FETP's 1,100 graduates serve in important national and provincial leadership positions. A private-public partnership, the Higher Engineering Education Alliance Partnership (HEEAP) has attracted millions of dollars in funding support from six major corporate partners, along with engineering equipment and expertise. HEEAP aims to transform engineering education in Vietnam and produce work-ready graduates for the country's booming high-tech sector.

Strong Congressional support for an independent Fulbright University of Vietnam (FUV) has inspired US and Vietnamese companies to consider major contributions. FUV will be the first private, not-for-profit university in Vietnam, and, building on the work begun by FETP, will create a transparently run, academic meritocracy and a platform for thoughtful policy recommendations. We recently announced major new funding for higher education partnerships, and we continue to expand our nationwide alumni network and improve English language teaching capabilities. Vietnam ranks first in Southeast Asia in the number of international students studying in the United States. We must ensure that this student exchange, in both directions, continues to grow.

## War Legacy Issues

Thanks to strong leadership by Senator Patrick Leahy and the long-term engagement of many in and out of government, the United States has invested more than \$65 million in dioxin cleanup to date and \$80 million to cleaning up unexploded ordnance (UXO). This year we have doubled our annual contributions to UXO activities to more than \$10 million. We look forward to helping Vietnam's newly established Mine Action Center (VNMAC) to become a fully functioning center that can engage with international donors and NGOs. Vietnam continues to support our efforts to provide the fullest possible accounting for our MIA/POWs, and the two countries are sharing expertise that may allow better accounting for Vietnam's missing.

## Defense and Security

We continue to make steady progress in all five priority areas of cooperation specified in the 2011 Defense Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding: maritime security, high-level dialogues, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), and peacekeeping operations. Regular high-level military visits help both sides understand and grow more comfortable with each other. This mutual understanding is turning talk into action. Last year, we conducted the first search-and-rescue exercise between our two Navies and an urban search-and-rescue exchange between our two Armies. Resource intensive activities such as Pacific Partnership and Pacific Angel are enhancing HA/DR cooperation. As Vietnam considers expanding its contributions to United Nations peacekeeping operations, the United States will continue to offer support. Other positive steps include the partial lifting of the US lethal weapons ban and Vietnam's decision to join the Proliferation Security Initiative.

Focused on modernizing its defensive capabilities, Vietnam will of course rely on its traditional partners. However, the United States has much to offer as well, and we will continue to take a long-term view to building a defense relationship. As we learn to work together, Vietnam will come to view the United States as a partner who can be relied upon to reinforce and strengthen regional security and international law. This will not happen overnight, and the United States must remain patient and take a long view of security cooperation. Progress in other streams of activity will likely facilitate progress in the security realm, which lags behind due to suspicions born of our complex history.

## Promotion and Protection of Human Rights

The United States supports a strong, prosperous, and independent Vietnam that respects the rule of law and human rights. Our annual human rights dialogue has been fruitful, and Vietnam's National Assembly unanimously voted to ratify the Convention Against Torture and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Vietnam has allowed greater space for religious freedom and released some prisoners of conscience although more needs to be done. Vietnam also modified laws to decriminalize marriage between two adults of the same gender and supported action in the United Nations that benefits Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) persons worldwide.

In addition to continuing to call for the release of all prisoners of conscience, the United States is focusing on working to support Vietnamese efforts at systemic legal reform and expansion of individual freedoms under the country's new constitution and international human rights commitments. The United States stands ready to work with Vietnamese authorities to advance public accountability, transparency (including access to information), and development of civil society. We are providing technical assistance on core Vietnamese laws, including on the budget and on access to information. The government has begun consulting with civil society and the private sector in the process of making and implementing laws. The United States must continue linking progress on human rights to progress in other areas, including economic and security cooperation.

### Culture, Tourism and Sport

85 percent of Vietnamese under the age of 35 view the United States as their country's closest partner. Through direct outreach, traditional and social media, and our cultural centers, the US Mission is connected to tens of thousands of young Vietnamese every day. We consistently demonstrate sincere respect for Vietnam's people, history, values, and culture. We have set up partnerships between Vietnamese and US cultural institutions, such as the Kennedy Center and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and continue to fund numerous two-way exchanges that help build people-to-people ties. We reopened a program permitting adoptions from Vietnam, starting with children over five, siblings, and children with special needs. An increasingly influential Vietnamese diaspora will play an ever more important role in strengthening linkages between the two countries.

The US and Vietnamese governments must use high-level visits and 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary events to carry out collaborative activities, make progress on remaining issues, and push forward new ideas. We must keep in mind, however, that for the past 40 years people-to-people contacts between the United States and Vietnam have moved faster than government-to-government engagement. The private sector, NGOs, educational institutions, think tanks, and foundations have played and continue to play a central role in building the United States-Vietnam partnership. Where nongovernment partnerships are healthy and active, relations are strongest.

As we look to advance the Comprehensive Partnership, we are clear-eyed. Our partnership will achieve its fullest potential if we work together on issues on which we agree, remain frank and open where we have differences—such as in the critical area of human rights—and be willing to broaden into new areas of cooperation.